

Political Realism and Political Idealism: The Difference that Evil Makes

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Abstract. According to a particular view of political realism, political expediency must always override moral considerations. Perhaps the strongest defense of such a theory is offered by Carl Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*. A close examination of Schmitt's main presuppositions can therefore help to shed light on the tenuous relation between politics and morality. Schmitt's theory rests on two keystones. First, the political is seen as independent of and prior to morality. Second, genuine political theory depends on a view of human beings as evil by nature. I will argue that both claims are incomplete. Just as the political sometimes demands that morality be overridden, so morality can demand the overriding of political expediency. Moreover, the view of human beings as evil, which serves as the foundation of political realism, itself depends on affirming that human nature must also be, in some sense, good. Political realism is thus shown to have its theoretical foundation within a normative framework that demands the political pursuit of at least some moral aims.

Key words: evil, Kant, liberalism, political realism, Carl Schmitt.

In *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt presents a striking and highly powerful picture of the political. It is primarily characterized, on his view, by two important features. First, the concept of the political is succinctly defined in terms of an antithesis: the famous distinction of friend and enemy. Since this is seen as a *real* distinction as opposed to a normative one, this move allows Schmitt to argue for the independence of the political from all normative considerations and, in fact, to place it above them. Second, Schmitt separates what he thus presents as a political *realism* from normative political theories, particularly liberal ones, which we may contrast to the former by the designation of political *idealism*.¹ It follows from this brief sketch that theories of the latter kind are mistaken about the nature of the political. I will argue here that Schmitt's characterization of the political does not succeed. The first thesis about the political depends for its success on the second thesis about political theory. But the second thesis itself rests on a hidden normative premise about the nature of good and evil in human beings. I will conclude that the moral underpinnings of the argument invalidate the separation of political and moral spheres.

1] The term "political idealism" here is not meant to single out any particular political theory. Following Schmitt's own distinction, I use it to encompass all political theories that allow for normative components to play a guiding role in the political and, specifically, to do so *as* normative components. The latter qualification is needed for the following reason: Schmitt is willing to admit that normative considerations might play a role in the production of political conflicts or alliances – that is, moral or aesthetic agreements and disagreements might escalate to the political level. But they do not enter the domain of the political *as* normative agreements and disagreements; they merely provide material for conflict, which the political addresses without taking their normative status into account.

Both of these theses involve the relation between the political and the moral. I emphasize these particular aspects of Schmitt's thought because they are central to his political thinking as a whole, and also because I believe these to be the crucial points we must examine in order to avoid the trap Schmitt lays out for us, that is, the trap of too easily accepting the idea of the political as capable of being purified and separated from any relation to the moral. The place of morality in the two theses I will discuss is as follows. First, Schmitt defines the political by a criterion that distinguishes it and sets it apart from the spheres of economics, aesthetics, and morality.² Second, he insists that the view of human beings as evil rather than good by nature is the basic criterion by which *genuine* political theories may be distinguished from all others. In the first thesis, the relation between the political and the moral is overt; Schmitt explicitly presents the political as separate from the moral. In the second, however, the relation is covert, as Schmitt will attempt to de-moralize both good and evil insofar as they relate to the political. My goal will be primarily to demonstrate that Schmitt's reliance on this covert relation creates a conceptual difficulty for his political theory.

Although my argument here is largely a conceptual one, and aimed narrowly at a text no longer studied seriously by most political philosophers, I believe it has several wider repercussions. In particular, Schmitt provides us with one of the strongest arguments in the history of philosophy for the view of political considerations as surpassing and subsuming normative ones. What he defends, in other words, is *Realpolitik* in its strongest and barest form. Furthermore, he defends it on philosophical, rather than merely practical grounds. Schmitt's argument is not simply that expediency demands political decisions be made quickly and decisively without the delays and vacillations demanded by moral debate. For him, the demand to leave morality out of politics is not, at bottom, a matter of expediency at all. Rather, the nature of the political itself makes it immune to any moral considerations, and the importance of expediency is grounded in this nature. In today's political climate, which has barely emerged from a period in which justifications for war, torture, and suspension of the Geneva Conventions were presented as resting on considerations that trump moral concerns, Schmitt's argument is well worth revisiting.³

2] Schmitt sees the separation of the political from the economic, as well as the moral, as crucial to his case, because he takes the notion that economic influences are the driving force behind politics to be a dangerous dogma of liberal thought. On the other hand, the aesthetic threat is that the political may be transformed into spectacle (as in some postmodern theory or the media circus of American politics), obliterating the place of the political as an essential human concern. Here I will leave economics and aesthetics aside and focus instead on morality, since I believe the attempt to separate the political from normative concerns is the core of Schmitt's strategy.

3] In recent decades Schmitt's criticism of liberalism and democracy has also been appropriated, in interesting ways, by thinkers on the Left (see, e.g., Mouffe 1999). I only hint at some of the main challenges here, but it is worth noting that my argument does not curb the main thrust of these appropriated critiques.

I

The first thesis is a pivotal aspect of Schmitt's theory. In his attack on liberalism, he attempts to counter the liberal tendency to dispose of the political entirely, to reduce it simply to morality, to economics, or to aesthetic entertainment. Against a world that sees culture as consisting of mutually independent spheres outside the jurisdiction of the state, Schmitt posits the primacy of the political as if recalling a buried memory. By painstakingly tracing out the changes Schmitt made in the three successive editions of *The Concept of the Political*, Heinrich Meier (1995) demonstrates that the attempt to define the political grew radically more ambitious between the first edition of 1927 and the third in 1933. Schmitt began by attempting simply to procure an independent domain for the political against what he saw as a liberal tendency toward the depoliticization and neutralization of human existence. Initially, then, he wanted only to demonstrate that the political has its own sphere, distinct from other spheres of culture. Schmitt brings out the domain belonging to each sphere by positing an antithesis which defines that sphere: "Let us assume that in the domain of morality, the final distinction is good and evil; in aesthetics, beautiful and ugly; in economics, advantageous and disadvantageous or, for example, profitable and unprofitable." It follows that, to distinguish the political from these other spheres, Schmitt must formulate an antithetical pair as a criterion for it: "The specifically political distinction, to which political actions and motives refer, is the distinction between friend and enemy" (1963, 26).⁴ Thus, all political activity is aimed at making a distinction between friends and enemies.

Whereas in 1927 Schmitt's goal of simply formulating and defending the distinctive features of a purely political domain seems fairly modest, by 1932 he expands his initial criticism of the liberal conception of autonomous domains of activity. The problem with this conception, for Schmitt, is that it covers over the political by attempting to shield all other domains of human culture from state interference. Liberalism is, thus, merely a bourgeois ideology intended to allow citizens to enjoy their wealth, their relations with others, and their entertainment activities in a purely private capacity. The point of breaking up culture into autonomous spheres is precisely to keep bourgeois activity out of the public domain and, consequently, away from the coercive power of the state. To counter this conception, it is not enough to simply present the political as one domain among others. It is crucial to show not only that it is independent of determination by any other sphere of culture, but also that it dominates over all other spheres. The political is now clearly not a sphere at all; it is, rather, a term for "the most extreme degree of intensity of a bond or a separation, of an association or a dissociation" (1963, 27).

4] The 1963 German reprint contains the text of the second edition, published by Schmitt in 1932. All translations from this work are my own, though I have benefited from George Schwab's efforts in Schmitt 1996. Readers interested in consulting Schwab's translation should note that the pagination is virtually identical to the German edition, for which reason I have not added it here.

The price of this expanded conception of the political is that Schmitt can no longer hold on to the idea of a “pure” politics, a political sphere analogous to the moral, aesthetic, and economic spheres. If the political refers only to the intensity of enmity, then this enmity must have its origin within some sphere or other that is not itself political. It may arise out of economic disagreements, moral disagreements, religious disagreements, and so on. Yet, although the political cannot exist without any other spheres, it remains pure in the sense that it is not dependent on any particular sphere. The political appears whenever a conflict can escalate to an extreme point, a point at which war becomes a possibility.⁵ Schmitt’s conception of the political now allows it to dominate over all domains of human activity in a way not possible so long as the political was only another sphere among others.

The argument for this primacy of the political is twofold. First, the political transcends all spheres of culture because each sphere may, in situations of conflict, escalate to the level at which it becomes politicized. Second, and more pertinent to my focus here, political concepts, because they involve the possibility of resolving a conflict through war, “have their real sense through the fact that they hold and maintain a reference to the real possibility of physical killing” (Schmitt 1963, 33). The emphasis on the word “real” here, shown through its repetition, is significant. The possibility of killing or of dying in war is a concrete possibility, not a theoretical or ideal one. This possibility also allows human beings to define themselves against an enemy. The participant in a conflict must “himself... decide whether the negation of his own kind of existence is signified in the otherness of the alien [i.e., the enemy] in the concrete, present case of conflict, and therefore whether that otherness will be fended off or fought in order to preserve one’s own, proper kind of life” (27).⁶

The political attains a primacy, therefore, because it is the final forum in which human beings must identify themselves and define their “kind of existence” by being willing to kill or be killed to preserve it.⁷ There are serious difficulties with this argument. First,

5] Of course Schmitt has already stacked the deck in his favor, so to speak, by insisting – without real argument or analysis – that each sphere of culture is defined by a central *opposition*. It is only a short step from this view of culture as an ongoing clash between diametrically opposed sides to the view that the political receives its mandate and its essence from the need to regulate and respond to these clashes.

6] The “himself” here is misleading, because Schmitt does not mean that each individual is the proper judge of friend and enemy. Although of course individuals can decide who their friends and enemies are, at the political level such decisions can only be made by the sovereign. Schmitt’s wording here is particularly confusing since he is at pains to separate political conflicts from individuals ones, and the political notion of friend and enemy (in which the enemy is always a “public enemy”) from the one contained in the Christian injunction to love one’s enemy (29-30).

7] C.f. J. S. Mill’s oft-quoted lines regarding war: “War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing *worth* a war, is worse... A man who has nothing which he is willing to fight for, nothing which he cares more about than he does about his personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself. As long as justice and injustice have not terminated *their* ever-renewing fight for ascendancy in the affairs of mankind, human beings must be willing, when need is, to do

Schmitt's view of the political involves one's self-definition at a group level, while the moral involves individual convictions and individual identity. That Schmitt places collective self-definition above personal self-definition as part of his argument for the primacy of the political is at best question-begging, but it is problematic on other grounds as well. The group identity in question here is explicitly affirmed in the political, but this can happen only because a group identity is already a prerequisite for any political conflict. In other words, Schmitt assumes the existence of nations involving a common identity among members as a foundation of the political, thereby excluding as anti-political any grouping that seeks to establish (rather than defend) its identity through political processes.⁸ The distinction between collective political action and individual moral action provides Schmitt with a convenient way of avoiding one kind of conflict between morality and politics. On the one hand, morality can require individuals to die in opposition to unjust laws, that is, in battle against the political. On the other hand, individuals may be required to kill others by political considerations, thereby violating their moral obligations. Schmitt addresses only this latter conflict, as it takes pride of place in his attempt to purify the political of any moral normativity.

But, and closer to the point I want to press later against Schmitt, the emphasis on death provides an odd foundation for an argument defending the primacy of the political over the moral. After all, morality has traditionally appeared with reference to its own extreme possibility, i.e., the possibility of dying for one's moral convictions. We find very clear arguments to this effect in, for example, Socrates's *Phaedo* and *Crito*, Augustine's *On the Free Choice of the Will* or in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. If we attempt to articulate the distinction between the possibility of death in moral discourse and its possibility in the political domain, we arrive at two avenues.

A. The political, more so than the moral, involves not simply the possibility of dying, but also that of killing. Schmitt's argument is not merely that the political requires physical killing of one's enemy in conflict with morality, but rather that morality has nothing to say about this at all. In an extreme case of conflict, one is called on by the political to kill one's enemy, but "there is no rational end, no norm no matter how right, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy or legality, that could justify human beings' killing each other for it" (Schmitt 1963, 49-50). The situation here is quite dire: killing one's enemy may be a political necessity, yet a necessity that cannot be justified by any moral norm. If we accept this view of morality, there appears to be only one way in which the moralist or the political idealist can respond. One can argue simply that nothing more is proven here than that the political as such is immoral. If the waging of war cannot be morally justified – if it is, in fact, immoral – then the domain of the political is itself evil. Schmitt's response to such an objection is that it is easily trumped

battle for the one against the other." (1862, 683-84)

8] For a development of this criticism, see Habermas 1998, 141-42.

by political realism. The idealist, in claiming that war is evil and refusing to go beyond this claim, will be unable to respond adequately to the real conflicts that materialize within the concrete practice of politics. An idealist will either be forced to avoid war at any cost, or will have to find moral justifications for war. The principled avoidance of war is, however, unfeasible: in cases of intense conflict, it would lead to the annihilation of one's form of life by an opposing enemy, so that the way of life that makes the principled avoidance possible in the first place would be lost. If fighting off an enemy becomes necessary, then, the idealist will resort to a moral justification, which will present the enemy as evil, inhuman, and deserving of being killed. But the problem with this approach is precisely that, in attempting to encompass the political, morality corrupts itself. By seeking to absorb the political, morality becomes its handmaiden, merely another tool of political discourse.

We seem, then, to be led to the following conclusion: if morality cannot justify political activity, and if that activity is necessary to human existence, then the political must be entirely immune from moral criticism. A decision to kill the enemy in order to preserve one's form of life is neither moral nor immoral. It is simply political. The independence of the political from the moral thus appears established. Yet this does not guarantee the *priority* of the political. For, even if the political is victorious in this conflict over the immorality (or, here, amorality) of killing, it is not yet clear why the moral may not likewise come out ahead in the other extreme conflict, where one is morally obligated to die in order to oppose political decisions. In other words, it still seems possible that, while the political is independent of morality, morality may likewise be independent of the political and may still be prior to it.⁹

That Schmitt does not confront this challenge head on may be due, perhaps, to an intentional oversight on his part. In rejecting the liberal view of autonomous, independent spheres of human activity, he is concerned only with establishing that these spheres are not independent of the political. He does not, however, address the possibility that the spheres are not at all independent of each other; in fact, Schmitt explicitly wishes to maintain that they *are* autonomous with regard to each other, since this allows him to place all human activity under the reign of the political without requiring a similar contamination in return; and it is a crucial part of Schmitt's critique of liberalism that the political be understood on its own terms, apart from determination by economic, moral, or other criteria. Thus, Schmitt places morality within its own sphere of bourgeois life. "The individual may voluntarily die for whatever he wants to; that is, like everything essential in an individualistic-liberal society, for all intents and purposes a 'private matter'" (Schmitt 1963, 49). The decision to die for a moral belief seems, to say the least, to be an odd thing to place under the category of a comfortable bourgeois existence.

9] Of course morality would only be prior from the moral perspective, or the perspective of a conflict described as a moral one. The political would have priority from the political perspective. My point, however, is that in insisting on a radical separation between the two domains, Schmitt begs the question against the moral perspective.

Schmitt's view that politics is destiny¹⁰ seems to rest precisely on this distinction between public and private. The individual may be forced to kill, despite his or her own moral objections, in order to preserve a public existence. The decision to make a group of people kill another group is a concrete possibility, not a private matter. That is, the individual cannot simply shrug off such a requirement, but is necessarily confronted with it. A moral decision, however, *is* a private decision, and the individual may choose to ignore it at will. A citizen called to fight in a war may choose not to heed the call and to face the consequences. But he or she is not forced to make such a choice on moral grounds. Human beings are faced with the concrete reality of the political in a way that they are not faced with the reality of the moral. But here the political idealist has a clear rejoinder: that the individual is not forced to make a moral choice is the wrong conclusion to make. Rather, in a society that has forgotten the importance of morality (just as, according to Schmitt, liberal society has forgotten the importance of the political), the individual can ignore the fact that his or her decision is a moral one. That one is not explicitly faced with a moral decision *as* a moral decision does not mean that the moral decision is not a concrete one. Historically, this view is clear in the consensus at the Nuremberg trials that "I was only following orders" does not excuse one from the charge of crimes against humanity.

B. The decision to compel the citizens of a state to kill is made by the sovereign; if anything, then, and in opposition to Schmitt's own expressed political leanings, one may suggest that this is precisely a key argument in defense of a (liberal) republican, rather than authoritarian, political system. This, in fact, is Kant's argument in defense of his "First Definitive Article for Perpetual Peace": the more the sovereignty is in the hands of those who are forced to suffer losses in war, the less the likelihood of conflict escalating to such a level (Kant 1999, Ak. 8:349-50).¹¹

I would suggest, then, that Schmitt succeeds in demonstrating the autonomy of the political (with regard to morality) *according to his conception of the political*; the question of the *primacy* of the political, however, remains unresolved. That the political has a concrete reality and, consequently, a primacy over the moral remains an assertion based on the merely *apparent* relative degree of reality of the political over the moral. Ultimately, however, both the question of the independence of the political from the moral, and that of its primacy, rest on the question of whether human beings are, really, moral beings in any significant sense. Here we move to the second aspect of Schmitt's thought that I wish to address.

10] This claim is attributed to Schmitt in a powerful summary of his view: "The political is a basic characteristic of human life; politics in this sense *is* destiny; therefore man cannot escape politics" (Strauss 1932, 94).

11] All references to Kant will give the volume and page number from the German Akademie edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, standardly used in writing on Kant and available in the margins of most recent English translations of Kant's works.

II

Schmitt's criterion for the classification of political theories is the following: "One could examine all theories of the State and political ideas according to their anthropology, and divide them based on whether they, consciously or unconsciously, presuppose man to be 'by nature evil' or 'by nature good'" (1963, 59). At first glance, of course, this seems to suggest that the division of political theories is, in fact, grounded in the same antithesis of good and evil that provides the criterion for the moral sphere. That impression is, however, misleading, as Schmitt goes on to state that, "The distinction is entirely summary and not to be taken in any special moral or ethical sense. Decisive is the problematic or unproblematic nature of man as the presupposition of every further political consideration, the answer to the question whether man is a 'dangerous' or not dangerous, risky or harmless and not risky being" (1963, 59). "Good" and "evil" are not, here, moral terms; they are, rather, anthropological ones, as indicated already by the "by nature" prefixed to each term. Whether or not this de-moralization of moral concepts can be made coherent is a question I will return to momentarily. First, however, it is important to draw attention to the way in which this distinction is from the outset quite different from the moral one.

"All genuine political theories presuppose man to be 'evil,' viz., consider him not at all as an unproblematic, but rather as a 'dangerous' and dynamic being" (Schmitt 1963, 61). This evaluative classification follows from the main lines of Schmitt's theory that have already been sketched out. The liberal or political idealist sees human beings as good by nature; such a thinker therefore either refuses to accept the possibility of having an enemy who must be killed or invents an excuse that makes the enemy out to be evil, either because that enemy is somehow less than human, or because he has deviated from natural goodness. The political realist – or the genuine political thinker, in Schmitt's terminology – accepts human evil; thus, he or she requires no *moral* justification when the necessity for war arises. Furthermore, the believer in human good ultimately doubts the need for government; if human beings are truly good, then government may be superfluous; it may, perhaps, have no important reason for being other than to regulate commerce and deal with the occasional deviant, as one reading of Locke's *Second Treatise* suggests. A thinker who believes that human beings are evil, on the other hand, recognizes the eternal need for a government that accepts the possible necessity for war and can decide on the basis of each case whether such a necessity has arisen. A political theorist who views human beings as good, then, cannot be a *genuine* political thinker, since the presupposition of human goodness, by undermining the need for government, undermines the necessity of political thought. Schmitt thus suggests that, taken to its extreme conclusion, the distinction between good and evil provides the basis for the corresponding political distinction between authoritarians and anarchists.¹²

12] This reduction of the main lines of political thought to either authoritarian or anarchist is, of course, intended to echo Hobbes's derivation of the rationality of indivisible and absolute sovereignty from

The important point to note is that the antithesis of good and evil does not function here in the same way that Schmitt sees it functioning in the moral sphere. For *here* only one side, the side of evil, is identified with a genuine theory. The side of good is misguided, or worse. Schmitt does not simply prioritize evil; he puts in question the reality of the good. From a *genuinely* political perspective, a perspective of realism, the good is only a fiction. Evil belongs to human nature, to concrete human reality.

To examine this point, we may return to Schmitt's earlier claim that morality is distinguished by the antithesis of good and evil. This is a dubious characterization of morality, at least in historical terms, as there is a strong historical tradition, stretching from Socrates through Augustine and beyond, which denies the reality of evil altogether. According to this tradition, which we may here label as the tradition of transcendental morality (TM), evil is simply the absence or privation of good. Despite introducing further complexity into the analysis, Kant is perhaps the most prominent modern defender of this tradition. In a passage in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant criticizes the Stoics (and, by extension, the entire tradition) for failing to recognize that the enemy of good is not simply a lack of discipline or wisdom, but is a real enemy: the principle of evil (Kant 1960, Ak. 6:57). Yet Kant's criticism here conceals his own bias in the presentation of the antithesis of good and evil and his underlying sympathies with the tradition. Both good and evil, for Kant, are defined in relation to the moral law. But evil is defined negatively, as a principle of occasional deviation from the law, while good is derived from the law itself. Furthermore, it is only because we have the moral law within us pointing us to the good that it makes sense to hold us morally accountable for our actions; and thus, again, it is only in relation to our possession of the law that we can be evil at all. Finally, the law is a product of reason, which regulates our understanding of nature. Deviation from the law, on the other hand, is occasioned by our surrender to natural inclinations. Although Kant asserts that human evil is universal, it remains the case that the good is metaphysically prior to evil; it is the standard against which evil is defined. Good and evil do not, therefore, form a true antithesis within the tradition of TM. If we limit our analysis of morality to TM,¹³ then it looks like the political, as Schmitt has described it, is in fact the flip side of the moral. The political presents evil as the defining term while denying the concrete reality of good. The moral, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of evil only through mediation by the good. To clarify, we can draw out the contrast – as well as the analogy – between morality, as conceived by TM, and politics, in Schmitt's political realist account:

the conditions of the state of nature – a derivation, as Schmitt is clearly aware, grounded on a presumption of human evil.

[13] This is not the place to make this argument, but I believe that TM provides the strongest account of the sort of morality capable of trumping one's inclinations, including self-interested motives and, in extreme cases, the instinct of self-preservation. In any case, some version of TM remains common in moral theory, especially in Kantian and (some) Aristotelian approaches.

TM: Morality presupposes the reality of the good as an ideal inherent in human nature, such that evil is understood merely as the absence of good or a failure to live up to the ideal.

PR: Political theory presupposes the reality of evil. Attributing reality (within human nature) to the good misrepresents concrete political reality and undermines the possibility of genuine political theory.

The appearance of a contrast may not be entirely accurate, however, since Schmitt has claimed that good and evil are not, in his differentiation of political systems, to be taken in a moral sense. How, then, should we take them? In discussing the variations that these concepts undergo in political anthropologies, Schmitt offers the following ones: “‘Evil’ can appear as corruption, weakness, cowardice, stupidity or also as ‘beastliness,’ instinctual drivenness, vitality, irrationality, etc., the ‘good’ in corresponding variations as rationality, perfectibility, tractability, educatability, congenial peacefulness, etc.” (1963, 59).

Leo Strauss, in his “Notes on Carl Schmitt”, argued persuasively that this distinction is untenable. The first set of definitions of evil presents it already in a moral light, and thus must be ruled out by Schmitt’s criteria. The second set, on the other hand, involves an “innocent” evil, an evil belonging simply to animality. But if human beings are evil merely by virtue of being animals, then they can be trained; and if they can be trained, then they can be educated. But “the limits one sets for education finally become a matter of mere ‘*supposition*’ – whether very narrow limits, as set by Hobbes himself, who therefore became an adherent of absolute monarchy; or broader limits such as those of liberalism; or whether one imagines education as capable of just about everything, as anarchism does” (Strauss 1932, 99). Since educatability falls, for Schmitt, on the side of good, the distinction between good and evil collapses.¹⁴

Strauss does not, however, address the list of variations for “good.” We may note from the outset that “corruptibility” must belong on this side, just as “corruption” belongs on the side of evil. A *genuine* political thinker views human beings as naturally corrupt; a misguided thinker, of course, in seeing human beings as good, must view corruption as

[14] As Meier convincingly demonstrates by examining the changes Schmitt made in his third edition in response to Strauss’s critique, his real notion of evil has little to do with animality and much to do with original sin. If the political may rely on the notion of original sin, however, it is not entirely clear what justifies the denial of divine grace. But I will not pursue this issue here, as my concern is with the philosophical, not the theological implications of Schmitt’s thought. Schmitt scholars may respond that in ignoring the theological implications I am, in effect, ignoring Schmitt’s own commitments. Since I am interested here primarily in the implications of Schmitt’s thought for the relation between politics and morality within the framework of secular theory, however, I propose pursuing the issue within that arena, leaving the theological questions for work in the domain of Schmitt studies. Since a radical separation between politics and morality is a threat in secular, as well as theological, circles, and since Schmitt on my view provides a powerful defense of that separation, I hope my lack of attention to the theological details is justified for the purpose at hand.

a fall from innocence. What Schmitt has in mind when referring to theorists on the side of good, I suspect, are thinkers like Rousseau, as well as Kant, whose view can be summarized by his interpretation of the biblical account of the fall: “man is represented as having fallen into evil only *through seduction*, and hence as being *not basically* corrupt... but rather as still capable of an improvement” (Kant 1960, Ak. 6:44). Even Nietzsche fits on this side, contrary to Schmitt’s protestations, for despite his sympathies with evil, he insists that Christian morality can and in fact has tamed humanity; the appearance of so-called “higher men” who free themselves from that yoke can, from this perspective, be seen as a rare aberration that poses little threat to the moral order.¹⁵ The theorist of evil, by contrast, sees human beings as always corrupt and therefore as incapable of improvement. Leaving aside the rhetorical question of how many thinkers have, in fact, shared such a strict view, we may turn to what is entailed by it.

First, Schmitt’s suggestion that the genuine political theorist views human beings as dangerous and *dynamic* is questionable. A dynamic being, one would think, is capable of change; it is a being that can either be improved from a corrupt to an uncorrupted state, or vice versa. But both of those views, the possibility of being improved (educatability) and the possibility of being corrupted (which implies a natural lack of corruption), fall squarely on the side of good. What is left for the side of evil, in fact, is an entirely static being; a being that is dangerous not because it is dynamic, but because it will predictably shrug off every norm when given a chance. And this is, in fact, what seems required for Schmitt to associate the side of evil with genuine political thought. After all, if human beings are capable of improvement, then the perpetual need for government, for the political itself, is undermined. Either it was never needed to start with, or it can disappear once humanity has reached the proper level of improvement. The static nature of evil gives it the appearance of concreteness, of reality. Unlike the good, which is grounded in conjectures about improvement, evil can be presented as a brute fact.

A second look at the list of variations may suggest that the side of good is (in TM terminology) full of capacities, while the side of evil is largely populated by incapacities. The capacities to be educated, to become tractable or capable of perfection, are genuinely *abilities*, belonging to human goodness. On the side of evil is perpetual corruption, drivenness by instinct, irrationality: these imply a lack, an inability to change or to be changed. What distinguishes evil, what sets it apart, is precisely its lack of dynamism: it is not *becoming*; it is concrete, actual *being*. Change, for better or worse, is an unpredictable, unclear ideal. Sameness is true reality. Remaining the same, refusing – not by choice, but *by nature* – to be tamed or educated, involves an inability to adapt and adjust to new circumstances. And this is precisely Schmitt’s underlying point: it is *because* human beings do not and cannot change, from his perspective, that the political always remains necessary; changeable be-

15] That, of course, is not Nietzsche’s own view. The point is only that his account of the transformation of human nature through Christianity assumes a tamable and educatable human nature, that is, a nature “good” in Schmitt’s sense.

ings might change their destiny, they might outgrow the political, but for human beings who are evil by nature, politics is destiny.

If Schmitt succeeds in demoralizing moral terminology at all, he succeeds only on the side of evil. Good, insofar as it may involve the ability to be educated and tractable, allows for the human possibility of being governed by moral norms. Evil beings, on the other hand, require the constant presence of the watchful eye of the political. They require it because moral norms will not stick to them, because their unchangeability makes them eternally dangerous. But this distinction between a demoralized, “anthropological,” factual notion of evil and a moralized, or at least always potentially moralized, notion of good seems, once again, analogous to the TM tradition.¹⁶ And once again, following through with the analogy, we may ask: what does this reality, this concrete unchangeability, mean at all? Where does it get its supposed reality? I propose that it is precisely by contrast with the good, with the moral, idealized, changeable notion of humanity. Insofar as the good is seen as merely ideal, its opposite can be presented as real. My argument does not require going as far as the position of TM: it is not necessary to insist, dogmatically, that evil can be defined only through the priority of the good. My point, rather, is that evil, even a demoralized, concrete, *real* evil, is incomprehensible without the possibility of the good, understood in a moral sense.

So what does the task of demoralizing evil amount to? As noted above, Strauss argues in his critique that “the opposition between evil and good loses its keen edge, it loses its very meaning, as soon as evil is understood as innocent ‘evil’ and thereby goodness is understood as an aspect of evil itself.” And Strauss goes on to suggest that Schmitt’s aim is not to demoralize evil at all, but to affirm it, in a moral sense, in order to affirm the political. “The task therefore arises – for purposes of the radical critique of liberalism that Schmitt strives for – of nullifying the view of human evil as animal and thus innocent evil, and to return to the view of human evil as moral baseness” (1932, 99). A very natural reading of Schmitt, one according to which his aim is really a politically oriented reevaluation of morals, arises from this trajectory.

Instead of following Strauss’s path, I have attempted to trace the logic that a genuinely demoralized evil demands. As I have indicated, tracing this path is crucial if we are to understand political realism, since if political realism merely affirms a moral evil, then it is simply immoral. The stronger goal of giving the political a priority over and independence from the moral requires that morality be excised from anthropology altogether. But as I

16] The reference to possibility or potential here is important, especially in showing why the notion of a good in human nature tends toward a specifically *moral* good, rather than simply an innocent animal good. Among the human capacities is rationality, and this means that unlike the other animals, human beings who are capable of being educated are also capable of following their reason and, in Kantian terminology, acting on their conception of a law and thus subjecting themselves to norms. As Schmitt’s reference to evil as irrationality suggests, his anthropology insists not that human beings lack reason, but that they do not normally follow it. But this view is commonly upheld by the TM tradition, whose defenders note that it is only the *capacity* for reason that is needed to hold us accountable for our moral failings, but also to allow us to strive to overcome them. Human beings may all be evil, but they are also all potentially good.

have been attempting to show, this project involves taking the TM view of human nature and cutting out the ideal of the good along with any human capacities conducive to striving for it. What is left – demoralized evil – can then be presented as pure, unchangeable, and real. The move is not from a view of human nature to a view of the political; rather, political realism begins with the concept of the political and then affirms the anthropology presupposed by it. And this means that the argument can just as easily be reversed. If we start with a more complete anthropology, it turns out that while Schmitt's concept of the political may be correct, it is also grossly incomplete.

III

Let us attempt, in conclusion, to find the key to Schmitt's theory. We can state it as a paraphrase of Schmitt's claim: Any political realism presupposes that man is by nature evil. That is, any theory that assumes that the political deals exclusively with real and concrete conflicts, that defines the normal functioning of the political – as well as the necessity of such functioning – in relation to exceptional situations, takes as its presupposition the view of humanity as evil. If human beings are irredeemably evil, the political must occupy itself entirely with a behavior oriented toward the possibility of war. But there is a flip-side: insofar as the human being is anything other than that; insofar as there is any potential for something beyond stupid, corrupt dangerousness, the political cannot be defined exclusively by the antithesis of friend and enemy.

And here is the crux: Even if we accept the real need for such distinctions, and even if we grant that behavior oriented toward the possibility of war is at least partially motivated independently of moral distinctions, two outstanding claims of Schmitt's political realism remain to be substantiated. The first is the claim which we have already examined: that of the autonomy of the political. If the political can take precedence over the moral, it remains unclear why, on either a practical or a theoretical view, a reverse contamination cannot occur. Second, the dominance of the political is put into question; for if the moral can enter into the sphere of the political, there remains always the possibility that the political may – if human beings are even potentially capable of improvement – similarly come to be dominated by the moral.

But why are we challenging the claim, which earlier seemed solid, that the political is autonomous with regard to the moral? The answer, already hinted at, is that a politics that concerns itself exclusively with intense association and dissociation is half-blind: it misses the potential for good, which is necessary for a proper understanding of evil. My suggestion is not that the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies is not a concern for the political; nor am I arguing that such activity does not enjoy some autonomy from the moral, although I suspect such an argument could be made. Rather, the point is that this cannot be the *exclusive* concern of politics. The political cannot be fully outside the moral realm, the realm of human improvability. If human beings have a capacity for betterment, the political cannot simply ignore that capacity while remaining morally neutral.

To quote Kant one more time, “moralizing politicians, by glossing over political principles contrary to right on the pretext that human nature is not *capable* of what is good in accord with that idea, as reason prescribes it, *make* improvement *impossible* and perpetuate, as far as they can, violations of right” (1999, Ak 8:373). Politics cannot act exclusively on the assumption of human evil without itself becoming evil, and evil in a moral rather than anthropological sense.

That the political has a role to play in the *development* of human beings, and not simply in the possibility of their killing each other, may already be gathered from an analysis of Schmitt’s own remarks concerning the potential need to fight off an enemy “in order to preserve one’s own, proper kind of life” (1963, 27). Already implied in this statement is the need for *preservation* of a kind of life, a preservation that simply cannot occur exclusively through an encounter with an enemy. The political must have, as one of its functions, the nurturing of the potential for good in human nature; if this function does not necessarily overrule the conflictual function of the political based on human evil, it must at least complement that function. If human beings are both evil and good, in some sense, the political must address itself to both sides of our anthropology.

Preservation is, of course, an ambiguous term. It could mean nothing more than maintaining the status quo. But if human beings are genuinely incapable of change, it is unclear why preserving any particular way of life over another might be worthwhile: any way of life is just as good, or just as bad, as another. To be worthwhile, then, it seems preservation must involve something more: the preservation of a way of life not only at an existing stage of development, but rather the preservation of this development itself. As a function of the political, the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies must be oriented toward the purpose of nurturing or at least allowing for improvement, “for whatever might be the highest degree of perfection at which humanity must stop, and however great a gulf must remain between the idea and its execution, no one can or should try to determine this, just because it is freedom that can go beyond every proposed boundary” (Kant 1998, A317/B374).

To place the political entirely beyond the reach of moral criticism, then, is to leave it aimless and blind. Nor should we be satisfied only with meeting Schmitt half-way by suggesting, for example, that the political may have two aspects, a real and an ideal one, that do not intersect. It is one thing to insist that the political requires expediency, that it is meaningless without the possibility of war, and even that the need for war may not rest entirely on the moral for its legitimacy, so that some political decisions may appear both necessary and immoral. But it is another thing to insist that the political can operate entirely without serving moral purposes or that it can be fully immune from moral criticism. Balancing genuinely moral with genuinely political considerations – if we can still meaningfully make the distinction – is a difficult task, and one that frequently threatens to undermine the grounds of both sides involved. But this balancing act is poorly described

as involving a conflict between independent spheres, or between collective and merely private considerations. It is a conflict internal to political theory itself.¹⁷

This conclusion may be prosaic. But my point is precisely that Schmitt's analysis of the political appears so exciting *because* it obscures prosaic truths. It is captivating because it seems to make feasible what is really unfeasible: the possibility of a coherent notion of evil without a notion of good. And it is only if we first accept such a possibility that we can allow for the more serious possibility that Schmitt pushes on us, that is, the possibility of a politics purified of moral content.¹⁸

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17] And, it almost goes without saying, to moral theory itself.

18] I would like to thank Prof. Dr. László Tengelyi and other audience members at my panel at the International Association for Philosophy and Literature in Freiburg, June 2006, for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.