Cain said to Abel his brother, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. (Gen. 4:8)

It is an ancient story, wrapped up in a vision of the world’s creation that the modern mind is inclined to take with a grain of salt. Yet, for all its mythic proportions, it is a very human story. Cain and Abel were brothers at the dawn of time, the first two natural offspring of the primordial man and woman, Adam and Eve. Cain, the older and presumably the stronger, was a tiller of the ground; Abel, his younger brother, was a keeper of sheep. Both brothers had brought an offering to God. Abel’s was accepted; Cain’s was not. The reaction of the aggrieved older brother might have to be explained to a visitor from another solar system but not to a human being born of earth. He was “very angry, and his countenance fell” (4:5). In your anger “sin is couching at the door,” God had warned him, and “you must master it” (4:7), but Cain did not master it. Instead, he lured his brother out to the field, where he thought no one could see and there murdered him. “Where is Abel your brother?” God then asked him. “I do not know,” he brazenly replied, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4:9). To the very end there was neither compassion for Abel nor remorse for killing him. Cain’s only grief was for himself, that he had been found out and punished.

The tone of the story makes it quite clear that Cain’s evil deed did not come from the prompting of some malign demigod, as is so often the explanation for human evil in other ancient literatures; nor was it the result of dread Ananke, the inexorable Necessity of the Greek tragedians. It was something that issued from his own nature, which is to say from his own intrinsic human nature. Sigmund Freud once observed, somewhat cynically, that “each of us will be well advised, on some suitable occasion, to make a low bow to the deeply moral nature of mankind; it will help us to be generally popular and much will be forgiven us for it.” These ancient scriptures of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions make no such low bows. Human nature, in their view, is capable of every wickedness.

If it is not Cain murdering his brother, then it is his descendant Lamech killing a man on slight provocation and then struttingly, triumphantly boasting

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of it before his two wives (Gen. 4:23-24); or the two cunning daughters of Lot getting their father drunk and then seducing him (Gen. 19:30-38); or the woman who is willing to have a child cut in half rather than see the other woman have it whole (1 Kgs. 3:16-28); or Solomon’s use of the remnants of five conquered peoples as slave labor in construction projects (1 Kgs. 9:15-24). Murder, rape, cruelty, theft, guile, treachery, callousness, ruthlessness, abuse of power and authority—it is all there, unflinchingly sketched out in the most vivid colors. Even King David, biblical hero par excellence and sweet singer of psalms, cunningly contrived to have his loyal captain Uriah slain in battle so that he might possess Uriah’s wife (2 Sam. 11:2-27), for he had seen her from his roof late one afternoon while she was bathing, “and the woman was very beautiful” (11:2): human, all too human—especially if one has the powers of a king.

From the standpoint of the religious traditions that are rooted in these scriptures, the problem with all this unflinching recognition of the soul’s dark side is to understand how it got there. For, that is not at all what the Creator appeared to have had in mind. It is a problem even for those portions of the Jewish and Christian traditions that do not take their scriptures as literally true in every jot and tittle. In the first creation story recounted in the book of Genesis, we are told that God, having labored six days to create the world, looked upon all that God had made—“and, behold, it was very good” (1:31). At the center of it all were two human creatures, man and woman, the primordial pair from whom all subsequent generations would descend (Gen. 1:26-31). They had been made in the image of God, after God’s own likeness; behold, they, too, were “very good.” God blessed them and said to them, with a distinct tone of parental pride and confidence: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (1:28). What an auspicious beginning for the human race!

Then, with hardly any transition at all, we begin to sense that there is something grievously amiss in this newly created bearer of the divine image. First comes the disobedience of the man and woman in the paradise of Eden (Gen. 3:1-13). It was not a heroic disobedience, as some have tried to represent it but a mere pusillanimous yielding to temptation. “The serpent beguiled me” said the woman, “and I ate [of the forbidden fruit]” (3:13). The man went even further in disowning responsibility: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (3:12, emphasis mine). Next comes the story of Cain, then Lamech, and on and on it goes, verse upon verse, chapter after chapter. After only a few human generations, even the Creator came to have second thoughts about whether these creatures were really “very good,” as God had first pronounced them or, indeed, whether they were any good at all. For God “saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved
him to his heart” (Gen. 6:5-6). At the risk of making complex things seem over-simple, we might say that virtually everything else in the books of the Bible, beyond Gen. 8, is the story of God’s endeavor to make the best of these human creatures despite their disappointing flaw—that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21).

So God had created humankind in God’s own image and pronounced it “very good.” Yet, it obviously contained some propensities that were not so very good. How was such a thing possible? If God were truly God, creator of all things according to God’s own design, then how could it happen that the creature at the very center of it all was so terribly flawed? For all but the most recent of the past twenty centuries of Western history, this was the predominant and, indeed, virtually the only form in which the question of human nature and the problem of evil was asked. That is hardly surprising, for the question itself is a distinctly Judeo-Christian kind of question. In and of itself, the human capacity for doing things that we call “evil” is merely a fact. It becomes a burning question only when it is apprehended as something that cries out for an answer. It arises only when one is shocked by human evil—when one looks upon it and senses that this is not the way things should be and that something is therefore surely out of joint. This is what lies at the heart of the biblical, Judeo-Christian vision of human nature—that the capacity for evil is not only a fact, but a shocking fact.

There is no other religious or philosophical tradition in which the question ever had quite the same burning intensity. There are some, indeed, in which the “problem of evil” is really no problem at all. In Hindu tradition, for example, what humankind calls “evil” is as much a true manifestation of the divine as everything else. In its occurrence, therefore, there is nothing out of joint, nothing startling, nothing that cries out for an answer. I do not offer this comparison invidiously but only to make the point that the view was radically different among those peoples who sooner or later fell under the spell of the biblical tradition, for here even God was represented as being shocked by the occurrence of human evil. “What have you done?” he thundered at Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10b).

Insofar as the several branches of the Judeo-Christian tradition remained strictly monotheistic and included assumptions concerning God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and essential goodness, certain kinds of answers to the question were simply ruled out of court. In the third and fourth centuries of the Christian Era, for example, there flourished a powerful religious movement known as Manichaeism. Its central doctrine was that the conflict within human nature between good and evil derives from the fact that there are really two co-equal, god-like powers in the world—the one intrinsically good, the other intrinsically evil—continually vying with one another for hegemony over all creation. Although this Manichaean view exerted a powerful subterranean influence within Christianity for many centuries—and reverberates even today in those precincts where the concept of “the devil” is taken quite seriously—it
is plainly incompatible with the vision of a one-and-only God who is both omnipotent and essentially good.

The benchmark of authoritative Jewish and Christian reflections on the question of human evil was that they could not attribute the evil to some other god, for there was no other; nor to some lesser Prince of Darkness, for that would violate the canonical attributes of omnipotence and essential goodness; nor to a bungled creation; nor to a creation whose consequences God was simply unable to foresee. Most of all, they could not attribute human evil to God, for, although humankind had surely been created in the divine image, the evil of which it proved itself to be so capable was most certainly neither a part of that image nor an expression of it in any way. There was but one place to look for the source of human evil, and that was in human nature itself.

What I have been calling so far the “Judeo-Christian tradition” was of course not a single tradition but a very complex family of traditions. The same variegated complexity is found among the many views of human nature and human evil that have appeared within these traditions. Although they all grow from a relatively small number of main branches, there are differences among them that, to those who have held them, make all the difference in the world. For present purposes I will be examining only the main branches, in general outline, without much regard for variation and nuance. Also, as my present interest in these views lies chiefly in what they say—or claim—about human nature, I will avoid as much as possible becoming enmeshed in issues of theology or theodicy.

The earliest of these main branches was the Jewish conception of the yetzer ha'rah, which began to be developed explicitly in the late pre-Christian period of Jewish history, received fairly full expression in the Talmudic period, and has remained till the present as the predominant Jewish understanding of the human capacity for evil. The concept was biblical in origin and appeared fairly explicitly in two key passages already quoted from the book of Genesis: “every yetzer of the thoughts of his heart was only evil [rah] continually”; and “the yetzer of man's heart is evil [rah] from his youth.” In English versions of the Bible yetzer in this context is usually translated as “imagination.” Its more general meaning is something along the lines of “inner nature and disposition.” In contemporary scholarship it is usually rendered as “inclination”: hence, yetzer ha'rah, the evil inclination. The central idea was that there is in human nature, and thus in every individual human being, an inclination to evil. As humankind was created in the image of God, there is also a yetzer tov, a good inclination. However, scripture and common experience alike clearly testify that the evil inclination, although perhaps not ultimately the stronger, is by far the more clamorous. It is like a mighty king who lays siege to a city, says the Talmud, and the good inclination is like a meek man inside the besieged city (N'darim 32b). “Daily man's evil inclination threatens to overwhelm and to destroy him” (Kiddushin 30b). Even the saintly must struggle with it until the day they die.

The question was how this evil inclination in human nature got there. Why
is it so clamorous? God created all things and must therefore have created the evil inclination as well, but to what end? The answer that evolved over the centuries went something like this. The evil inclination is not intrinsically, inexorably evil; it is only that it so readily results in evil when it is not mastered and kept within the purposes for which it was intended. At its heart it is a kind of *vis vita* or *élan vital*, the throbbing force of life that impels humankind to do what the Creator had commanded at the very beginning: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over [it].” Such large tasks require powerful impulses. In some respects (“be fruitful and multiply”) they are impulses found in other creatures as well. However, they are also distinctly human, for no other creature was given the charge of filling the earth and subduing it and having dominion over it. At any rate, in its original purpose the evil inclination is not really evil but good. The Talmudic sage Samuel bar Nachman went so far as to call it “very good.” For, without its underlying impulses, he observed, a man “would not build a house for himself or get married; he would neither beget children, nor ply a trade or pursue a profession” (Genesis Rabbah 9:7).

This is the heart of the matter. If humankind is to be human, rather than just another “living thing that moves upon the earth,” it must have these distinctly human inclinations, but with their powerful energy and impetus comes also the potential for evil. The very same urging that prompts one to build a house can also tempt one to steal a neighbor’s house. The same drive that impels one to subdue the earth can also lead one to subdue and dominate other human beings. The same inclination that fulfills the commandment to be fruitful and multiply can also lead to cunning seduction, sexual enslavement, and forcible rape. The task of humankind is not to root out these urgings of the evil inclination or to suppress them utterly, for that is neither possible nor desirable. It is, rather, to master them. When David saw Uriah’s wife at her bath, and she was “very beautiful,” the moral imperative was not self-castration but self-control.

The task is difficult, but not impossible, since God has also implanted in humankind the *yetzer tov*, the good inclination, and has bolstered it with knowledge, understanding, and the potential for wisdom. Moreover, as a self-imposed limitation upon God’s own omnipotence, God has also given humankind the moral freedom to choose between good and evil. In the traditional Jewish view, a moral law and a program of self-discipline had been given by God in the revelation at Sinai. “I have set before you,” God had said, “life and good, death and evil. . . . life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life” (Dt. 30:15, 19). God had also said: “This commandment. . . . is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. . . . [it] is very near you, . . . in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Dt. 30:11-14). So it is possible and even “not too hard”—but still far from easy. A fanciful rabbinical legend tells of a question that was put to God as God was preparing to create the first human beings:
"O Lord of the world! The world is Thine, Thou canst do with it as seemeth good in Thine eyes. But the man Thou art now creating will be of few days and full of trouble and sin. If it be not Thy purpose to have forbearance and patience with him, it will be better not to call him into being." To which God replies: "Is it for naught I am called long-suffering and merciful?"

Within the Christian branchings of the biblical tradition, the basic framework for dealing with the question of human nature and human evil was defined by the apostle Paul, of whom the following passage from his letter to the Galatians is quite characteristic:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. . . . Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. . . . But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; . . . And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal. 5:16-17a, 19-21a, 22-23a, 24)

As Paul was an educated Jew steeped in Jewish teachings, it is not surprising that his view of the "desires of the flesh" should have a certain degree of kinship with the Jewish concept of the "evil inclination." In particular, there was agreement that the source of human evil inheres in what we would in contemporary language speak of as basic human needs, drives, urges, and the like. However, there was also this fundamental difference. The Jewish teaching held that the power and impetus of the "evil inclination" had been created for good purposes and that they could, with human effort and God's help, be mastered, tamed, and turned back to those purposes. Paul, however, saw the passions and desires of "the flesh" as so utterly, incorrigibly corrupt as to leave no hope at all, save that they be completely rooted out, banished, "crucified."

The theological point on which this difference turned is well known: in Paul's language, it was the question of "works" and "the Law" versus "faith" and "grace," but behind the theology there was also a difference in perception. By his own account, Paul experienced "the flesh with its passions and desires" as something utterly distinct from and at variance with "the Spirit" that was in him — something so powerful and cunning as to be wholly incapable of mastery through human effort, even when guided by the precepts of the Law. Indeed, so cunning and bent on evil are the desires of the flesh that even the Law itself, though of the Spirit, is twisted to their purpose. "I should not have known what it is to covet," Paul wrote, "if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness" (Rom. 7:7c-8). The following passage from his letter to the Romans describes the experience with powerful directness:

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I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. . . . So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive of the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! (Rom. 7:15, 18-19, 21-24a)

As mentioned above, Jewish and Christian reflections on the question of human evil were necessarily constrained by certain assumptions. In Paul's case the perception of fleshly human nature as utterly corrupt and bent on evil, conjoined with the assumption that it, as all else, was originally created by God, entailed that it must have been corrupted at some point subsequent to creation by human beings themselves. As it happened, there was an episode in the biblical account of human history that fit the question exactly. It was the story of Adam and Eve, who ate of the forbidden fruit and thereby brought calamity upon the entire human race throughout all its generations. Although Paul left it for later Christian thinkers to draw the theory out in detail, it was clear to him that "sin came into the world through one man [Adam]" and that this one man's trespass, having somehow irrevocably corrupted human nature, had led to "condemnation for all men" (Rom. 5:12, 18).

Imbedded in Paul's view of the Adamic corruption of human nature and the consequent "law of sin which dwells in my members" was an idea that in one form or another has suffused virtually every branch of Christianity ever since. Its most full-blown expression is to be found in the doctrine of Original Sin as developed in the late fourth and early fifth centuries by Augustine, then Bishop of Hippo, later known to the world as St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.). As with Paul, Augustine's view of human evil was colored by a perception born of personal experience, although Augustine's was recounted in greater length and detail and was far more explicitly tied to that most fleshly of the "desires of the flesh"—sexuality. Even as a child, Augustine was "a great sinner for so small a boy." As he grew to adulthood he found "bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up" so powerfully within him as to enfold him completely in the "murk of lust," "tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my fornication." By the age of sixteen he was so gripped by the "frenzy" of bodily desire as to surrender himself "entirely to lust," from which there was no remission until the time of his adult conversion to Christianity at the age of thirty-one. Even then it was a constant struggle. In one of the

5Ibid., p. 33.
6Ibid., p. 43.
7Ibid., p. 44.
many poignantly candid passages of his *Confessions*, written about a decade after his conversion, Augustine told how he was still floundering in that broiling sea, especially during the secret hours of his sleep. "When I am awake," he wrote, the images of fornication still "obtrude themselves upon me, though with little strength. But when I dream, they not only give me pleasure but are very much like acquiescence in the act."\(^8\)

Owing, perhaps, to his very intimate acquaintance with the subject, Augustine was intensely preoccupied even before his conversion with "trying to find the origin of evil." "Here is God," he recounted saying to himself, "and here is what he has created. God is good, utterly and entirely. . . . But, since he is good, the things that he has made are also good. . . . Where then is evil? What is its origin? How did it steal into the world? What is the root or seed from which it grew?"\(^9\) Although the answer that Augustine gave to these questions has never lacked for dissenting Christian opinions, it has been far and away the most influential of all Christian reflections on the subject, even today. In very brief outline it went something like this.

The great turning point in human history came at almost the very outset when Adam and Eve, in willful abuse of the freedom of moral choice that God have given them, rebelled against God's will, transgressed against God's explicit prohibition, and ate of the forbidden fruit. Prior to this terrible moment they had existed in an unfallen state of "original righteousness," for they had been created in God's own image, and that image was wholly, utterly good and without stain, spot, flaw, or imperfection. Now, by desiring the forbidden fruit and yielding to that desire, they were wholly, utterly fallen from that original state of purity. This was the *peccatum originale* of the human race, its Original Sin, which was "original" not only in the sense of being first in the order of time but also in two other senses.

The first was that Adam and Eve, in falling from their original state of innocence, had brought the whole human race down with them, for they had introduced into human nature an irreparable flaw, which was now transmitted to all subsequent generations, "as from a corrupt root."\(^10\) This corruption of the moral root of human nature was what Augustine called the *vitium* of Original Sin. The Latin *vitium* is the root of the English words "vitiate" and "vitiated"; the idea was that something formerly pure was now corrupted, polluted, and rendered ineffective. The second sense was what he distinguished as the *reatum* of Original Sin, which means literally the "accusation" or "state of being accused." The implication was that there is a kind of hereditary transmission not only of the flaw of the primal sin but also of the guilt and condemnation. "For God, the author of natures, not of vices, created man upright; but man, being of his own will corrupted, and justly condemned,

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 233.
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 138.
It was a collective guilt, and condemnation extended to the entire human race throughout all generations. As that famous apothegm of the *New England Primer* put it, "In Adam's fall/We sinned all."

What is presently of interest to us in Augustine's doctrine is his concept of the *vitium* of Original Sin, that is, the flaw in human nature that now acts as the source and impetus of all that we would describe today as the human capacity for evil. Although he was surely no stranger to what Paul had called the "passions and desires of the flesh," it was not in the flesh itself that Augustine perceived the flaw but in the soul. Perhaps it was precisely because of his very intimate acquaintance with the "broiling sea of fornication." Perhaps it was also that Augustine, having flirted with Manichaeism in his youth, was keenly aware of the dualistic heresy latent in any view that holds "the flesh" or any other aspect of the material world to be inherently evil. In any case, he saw the evil engendered by the body's passions and desires as merely a secondary manifestation of something much deeper, for the human body was created by God and, thus, "in its own kind and degree the flesh is good." It leads to sin and evil only because the vitiated human will so readily yields to its pleasures and pains, thereby enslaving the soul to the mere things of creation and diverting it from its only proper course, which is to love and serve the Creator. The prime example is, of course, the enticement of sexuality, which not only takes possession of the whole body and outward members, but also makes itself felt within, and moves the whole man with a passion in which mental emotion is mingled with bodily appetite, so that the pleasure which results is the greatest of all bodily pleasures. So possessing indeed is this pleasure, that at the moment of time in which it is consummated, all mental activity is suspended.

While one might not share Augustine's view that such "possession" is inherently evil in every circumstance, it would be difficult to deny that it does occur more or less as he describes. It is probably also fair to say that, in most instances of it, the mind is not avidly flying to the love and service of God or to any other lofty goal. In varying degrees Augustine saw the same to be true of all other bodily enticements, including even the simple pleasures of taste, smell, sound, and vision. Following his conversion, for example, he undertook to "look upon food as a medicine," in order to avoid becoming ensnared in its pleasures, and thus to restrict the activity of eating to its only proper end, which was to preserve health for the love and service of God. Concerning his old acquaintance, sexuality, he wrote rather wistfully: "What friend of wisdom and holy joys... would not prefer, if this were possible, to beget children without

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11Ibid., p. 534.
13Ibid., p. 31.
this [pleasure], so that in this function of begetting offspring the [bodily] members created for this purpose should not be stimulated by the heat of lust, but should be actuated [only] by his volition?"  

At the psychological core of the flaw was what Augustine called "concupiscence," variously translated as "concupiscence," "lust," or "ardent, inordinate desire." It included not only the obvious enticements of the flesh but all other forms of "lust" as well: thus, the lust of revenge, which is born of anger; the manifold lusts for wealth, power, position, authority, conquest, dominance, applause, respect; and all the other "many and various lusts, of which some have names of their own, while others have not." The corrupted root of all these many and various lusts is the same terrible concupiscence that first afflicted Adam and Eve. "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden," God had told them; "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:16b-17). Then the serpent tempted the woman, saying: "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4b-5). The woman was beguiled. Seeing that "the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate" (Gen. 3:6). It was not just a lust for food or knowledge or wisdom but for the egregiously arrogant self-exaltation of being "like God."

This in one form or another is the root of every concupiscence and, thus, of every sin and evil. It is pride, the craving for "undue exaltation" in which the "soul abandons Him to whom it ought to cleave as its end, and becomes a kind of end to itself." Anger, hope, fear, pleasure, pain, wealth, position, applause, and all the other lusts both named and nameless — they are all united at their root by the Original Sin of prideful self-exaltation. Once again, the clearest example is the lust of sexuality. It might be accompanied by all manner of pious thoughts of procreation for the glory of God or blessed union with the beloved or whatever else one's own version of piety might be. However, at the moment of consummation, there is not even the pretense of concern with anything other than self-satisfaction. It is the soul's prideful self-centeredness raised to the highest power that flesh, with the consent of the vitiated will, is capable of raising it. The example is unique only in its details. Except for the particulars of its fleshly incitement and the acute intensity of its "possession," the concupiscence of sexuality is exactly like all the others. They all stem from the tendency of the soul to become its own focus, aim, and satisfaction.  

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Ibid., p. 31.


Though I think it unlikely that Freud even closely studied the writings of Augustine, his concept of "primary narcissism" seems to me to bear a remarkable resemblance to the Augustinian notion of *concupiscentia*. Freud had begun in fairly conventional Darwinian fashion by holding that the intrinsic motivational equipment of the human species includes two quite distinct kinds
“Where then is evil? What is its origin? How did it steal into the world?” Although Augustine's answers to these questions are by no means the only ones that appear in the rich historical tapestry of Christian thought, they have certainly been among the most prominent and influential. The most acute point of difference has been the Augustinian notion of the *reatum* of Original Sin, that is, the guilt and condemnation of the primal sin transmitted to all subsequent generations. To put it very briefly, some Christian answers have emphasized the notion of inherited guilt, while others have not. In any event, it is strictly a point of theology and therefore lies outside our present interest. The point of greatest consensus has concerned what Augustine spoke of as the *vitium.* Although there have been many differences of detail, it is fair to say that most Christian views of the subject have shared at least this central point of Augustine's vision, which was also the central point of the Apostle Paul. It is that the core of the problem of evil is the tendency to yield more readily to the clamorous urgings of “the flesh,” broadly understood as the “lower” emotional and instinctive, self-centered and self-aggrandizing side of human nature, than to the quieter but altogether higher promptings of “the Spirit.”

In its broad outlines, it is not so very different after all from the parallel Jewish concept of the “evil inclination.” There are differences, to be sure, just as there are differences among the various intramural versions of the Christian view, but the family resemblances are nonetheless obvious. At any rate, our own purposes will be best served by focusing on the similarities. The common theme throughout most of the centuries and most of the various branchings of the Judeo-Christian family of religious traditions has tended to be that the human being is a creature of shocking contradiction and contrariety.

On the one hand, humankind is created “in the image of God” and so contains within itself something of the essential goodness of God. For the Jews it was manifest in the *yetzer tov,* the good inclination, which like a still, small voice prompts the heart, in the words of the prophet Micah, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). For Paul it was the “desires of the Spirit” whose fruits are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” For Augustine it was “a faint glow of light” in humankind, a kind of “dim memory of truth,”

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of “instincts” (*Trieb*: drives, needs, impulses): those that support the preservation of the individual, and those that conduce to the propagation of the species—in brief, self-interest and sexuality, the “ego-instincts” and the “erotic instincts.” By 1914, however, he had come to believe that these two kinds of drives are really only varying expressions of the same underlying motivational dynamism, which, in its truest nature, is fundamentally erotic. Freud had used the term “narcissism” prior to this point, but only in connection with a specific form of psychopathology. Now it came to denote not just “a perversion, but the libidinal [erotic] complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation.” In brief, all human thought and action spring from love, in that distinctively Freudian sense of Eros, and all love is fundamentally self-love. See Freud's 1914 paper, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in James Strachey, ed. and tr., *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 14* (1914-16): *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), pp. 73-74.
which continually seeks to turn the soul back to its true calling in the love and service of God. Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian genius of the thirteenth century, described it as “naturalis inclinatio ad virtutem,” a natural inclination to virtue that even the calamity of Original Sin has not totally destroyed but only weakened by obstructing its expression.

On the other hand, there is something in human nature, equally inherent and deeply rooted, that tends to work in opposition to the good inclination and, all too often, overwhelms it. It is that clamorous assortment of “lower” needs, drives, urges, and passions variously described as the “evil inclination,” the “desires of the flesh,” “lust,” “concupiscence,” and the like. Although opinions have varied widely around the question of whether these impulses are intrinsically evil or only potentially so, virtually all have agreed that they are the force that drives what Augustine called “the whole train of evil... with its concatenation of miseries.”

The view that has predominated within historical Christianity traces the problem to a fundamental defect of the human will, which makes the proper regulation of these impulses exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. The traditional Jewish view has no place for either the *vitium* or the *reatum* of the doctrine of Original Sin, but it agrees nonetheless that the evil inclination is a very powerful and all-too-often triumphant adversary.

What both of these main branchings chiefly have in common, however, is not so much the concepts as the tone. By way of comparison, consider the allegorical image of human duality offered by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. It is the same melody but played in an entirely different key. The human soul, he wrote, is like a chariot drawn by two winged steeds. One of the steeds is “good and noble, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite.” The good steed is easily recognizable as a Hellenic version of “the image of God”: he is “upright and clean-limbed, carrying his neck high... a lover of glory, but with temperance and modesty... and needs no whip, being driven by the word of command alone.” The other is equally recognizable as the allegory of unruly instinct and passion: “crooked of frame, a massive jumble of a creature, ... hot-blooded, consorting with wantonness and vainglory;... and hard to control with whip and goad.” The first steed strains to pull the chariot ever upward toward the good, but the second, with its unruly strength and hot-blooded wantonness, relentlessly pulls or pushes downward or off to the side. So it is, Plato concludes, that “the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome.”

Difficult and troublesome indeed! What a world of difference there is between these rather tepid words of the Greek philosopher and the intense,
often anguished confrontation with the problem of evil that occurs within both of the main branchings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It all goes back to a point I made above. In and of itself, the human capacity for evil is merely a fact. It becomes a burning question, a dark stranger to be wrestled with throughout the night, only when one is radically shocked by it. This anguished sense of wrestling with a dark stranger — who is in reality no stranger at all, but rather the darker side of one's own soul — is one of those points where it seems to me Jews and Christians, even in those darkest moments of their common history, have always been much closer than they might often have realized. Granted, the evil impulse has all too often won the day, even among the good and faithful of these two main branchings of the biblical tradition. However, even when they were giving in to it, even when they were spilling blood, they could still not have been entirely free of that still, small voice within, echoing even if only faintly those booming, thundering words of the book of Genesis: “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.”

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