

No More Contempt

Working draft, built from commit 9991646

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Start here

This is a book in progress, and what you're looking at is the working draft. It's here so that people I trust can read it before it's finished and tell me where it fails. If that's you, thank you. Read this page first, because reading it straight through isn't the best way to start.

What it's about

This is a book about contempt: what happens when you decide that a person isn't just somebody who did a bad thing but a bad person, and what that decision does to them, to you, and to everyone who's watching. The book claims three things. That this one move is what we've always meant by the word evil. That it depends on a state of mind you can catch yourself in. And that the one stance that doesn't reproduce it is one most of us were taught to see as weakness. I don't ask you to accept any of that up front. The first chapter asks you to look at your own memory, and everything after it is built from what you find there.

Three lengths

The book exists at three lengths, and you can stop after any of them.

The short book is the Preface, Chapter 1, the interlude after it, and Chapters 2 to 5. It runs about 81 pages. Chapter 5 takes a picture everybody knows, the angel and the devil on your shoulders, and corrects it one feature at a time; each correction is a thesis the rest of the book unpacks. If you read nothing else, read to the end of Chapter 5.

The rest of the book, in first draft. Chapters 6 to 17 exist as short drafts, one per section of Chapter 5, written by an AI assistant from my notes and key points and not yet rewritten in my voice. Each is marked in red at the top, and below each draft you'll find the material of mine it was built from. Read them for the shape of the whole. The map below is the same ground in more detail.

The map, called *Where This Goes*, is the rest of the book in outline, about 64 pages: the same claims, walked through with more of the reasoning and evidence behind each one, in the order the finished book will follow. It's

scaffolding, and it won't be in the final version. It's here so you can see where the argument goes before it's been fully built.

The short version is for friends who practice. It assumes things the book proper never asks you to grant, and that lets it say the whole shape in a few pages. It leaves out the finer distinctions and the cases where the account could fail; those are in the full book.

The appendices are for readers who want the machinery of the argument, the thinkers who came closest to it, and the religious and contemplative traditions that got here first.

All of it in one file, if you'd rather read away from a browser: download the whole draft as an EPUB, a PDF, or plain text.

How to read it

Read it in order, and stop whenever you like. Chapter 1 does most of the work. Give it your full attention and actually do the things it asks, including the one that sends you out the door. The interlude sorts what you found into what you saw, what I make of it, and what I'm asking you to take on trust for now. Chapter 5 lays the whole argument out in one place, so you can see whether it holds together. After that you'll know whether you want to read the map.

Three kinds of claim

Some things in this book you can check against your own memory before you've finished reading the sentence. Some are conclusions I draw from what you checked. And some are things I believe, which I arrived at in ways I can't pass on to you. The book says which is which, every time the kind of claim changes. Those markers say where the checking stops. They don't say anything about who is allowed past that point.

If I've asked you for feedback

The most useful thing you can tell me is where you looked and didn't find what I said you'd find. That's a finding, and it counts against me. The

second most useful is where you stopped reading, and why. Everything else is welcome, but those two I can't get any other way.

A note on the writing

Parts of this draft, including this page, were written with an AI assistant working from my notes and under my direction, and those parts say so where they begin. The claims are mine, and so are the mistakes.

Preface

For so long as the root of wickedness is hidden, it is strong. But when it is recognized, it is dissolved. When it is revealed, it perishes. ... It is powerful because we have not recognized it. —The Gospel of Philip

Bring to mind the very worst people in the world. The ones who hurt innocents without any sign of regret—some of them, apparently, with *glee*. You know the ones I’m talking about.

How do you feel about them? How do you want *them* to feel?

Maybe you ascribe their behavior to a force called *evil*—something they have that we don’t. Or maybe you see it as a profound form of confusion. Either way, check if there’s a feeling that says: there’s something *fundamentally different* about them. *I* could never do that. I’m made of *better stuff*.

The rage we feel for them comes from something good in us—something that refuses to let them continue. But if we’re honest, there’s something else mixed in. A part of us that would love nothing more than to see them hurt—*quite independently of any good it might do*. Beyond the justice it would serve. Check and see if that’s true.

Here’s a test. Say you could either deliver the righteous vengeance they so richly deserve, or give them a pill that magically enlightens them—ending the threat, but no punishment at all. Forget the “right” answer. Isn’t there a flicker in there just *itching* to mash that first button?

I know there is in me.

But who cares, right? It’s not like we’d ever act on it. And if it’s just sitting there, confined to our skulls, then how could it matter? There’s no way it could have any effect on the world.

Except that it does. Because that belief—*I’m nothing like them*—doesn’t just stay in our heads. It leaks into the world. It designs our institutions, our politics, our justice systems. It compels us to behave in ways that secretly

reproduce the thing we hate, perpetually recreating a world full of “evil people” who we can be sure we’re nothing like.

The idea that the “dark” part of us is confined to our skulls: that’s the lie that lets it leak out.

You may have heard versions of this before and dismissed it. *Where’s the evidence?*

I want to show you exactly how it works. How a hidden impulse inside us inevitably expresses itself in our behavior and systems, and what we can do to end it.

Nothing here will ask you to soften what you see, forgive what shouldn’t be forgiven, or pretend the harm isn’t real. If anything, you’ll end up seeing more clearly what’s wrong—how our individual blind spots work together to create broken systems we can’t seem to fix.

I can’t argue you into this, and you should be wary of anyone who tries. What I can do is take you to the places where you can see it for yourself—in your own memory, where you have evidence I couldn’t have planted.

If you look and recognize what you find, *that’s* the evidence.

One thing about the language. I’m going to talk about darkness and light, and I’m going to talk about the darkness as if it were a thing that does things, because that’s how it behaves—and later, sometimes, as if it were one thing at work across all of us. If you’d rather read all of that as poetry, do. These are things to feel into, not beliefs to adopt. Nothing I ask you to check depends on taking any of it literally, and when I get to the parts that do, I’ll say so.

We’ll start with a small example, since that’s where this is easiest to see.

Chapter 1: Limbo

Have you ever done something you knew was wrong at the time, but couldn't fully admit to yourself until later? Maybe you made a cruel comment, took credit for someone else's work, or cheated on a test (or even a partner).

Recall what it was like to finally own up to it. The knowledge that it was wrong: did it feel like new information? Or like something you had always known, but somehow hadn't *let* yourself know?

We like to call such knowledge “unconscious”—as if we had no way of knowing—but that's not entirely accurate, is it? It was *right there* to see if you had looked; fully available to consciousness. You were just *turned away* from it. The knowledge existed in a strange kind of **limbo**, in which you simultaneously knew and yet somehow didn't.

And it wasn't just sitting there, idle: it affected your behavior. Any time someone came close to exposing the truth, or you started getting close to it yourself, you found a way to deflect, right? And that didn't happen passively.

Looking back, can you see how *some part of you knew exactly what you were doing, even as you did it*? The **behavior** took place in limbo, too.

Again, we normally call it “unconscious.” Do you see what incentive we might have to call it that?

Try to recall how you knew it was wrong in the first place.

Whatever it was, it arrived *before* you'd done any calculations, right? The part of you that knew: it couldn't say exactly how it knew, because it wasn't working from a rule. Meanwhile, another part of you was busy providing reasons. *Everyone does it. It's not a big deal. Just this once.*

Why did one side have to argue, and the other not? And which side did you listen to—the part that “just knew” or the part that could prove?

I mean, *obviously*. Why trust something that can't even justify itself?

And yet, despite “losing” that battle, notice that it never budged an inch. It kept on quietly knowing what it knew. And some part of you knew that wouldn’t go away.

That’s why you need limbo in the first place. If all you could hear was your own conscience—no justifications to hide behind—could you have even done what you did?

Limbo isn’t the kind of state we easily recognize or willingly remember, by its very nature. And if you have to enter it for even small misbehaviors, how much the more so for the big ones?

Would those be easier to recall, or harder?

Limbo exists in degrees. It’s not just black or white. And there’s one more thing to see.

To *be* in limbo entails knowing that you *are* in limbo—while also hiding it from yourself. In other words, limbo always contains itself.

The Two Strangers

Imagine that while you were in that state—doing wrong, justifying it, half-knowing—a stranger had caught you and publicly chastised you for it. Not just for doing something wrong, but for *being the kind of person who does*.

You’ve been in similar situations before. Really visualize this one, and imagine it playing out. When you try to exonerate yourself—not your behavior, necessarily, but what kind of person you are—what happens? Does he just let you go?

Think of how that affects you. Does it make it *easier* or *harder* to confront what you already know?

Harder, almost certainly. But why? Because *who the hell is he to judge*, right? He’s *obviously* the kind of person who does this too—things he knows are wrong, while pretending they’re not.

You'd take that bet at any odds. But on what evidence? You'd never met him. You knew nothing about him. All you had to go on was the way he was standing there, doing what he was doing.

Now imagine a different stranger had caught you—but instead of treating you with contempt, he treated you with dignity. Not more gently. Just that his anger was directed at what you *did*, and not what you *are*.

Would you have dug in? Vowed revenge?

So the problem wasn't being caught. In fact, he could have been *harsher* than the first person—said things that stung more, in front of more people, left you less room to wriggle out—and it still wouldn't have triggered the digging-in response.

Why not? Again, try to put yourself back in those shoes.

It's like he was reminding you of something: that *you're better than this*. Meanwhile, the first stranger was claiming that *this is all you are*.

And notice one more thing about him. You might have disagreed with him on nearly everything—politics, religion, creed—and it wouldn't have mattered. Whatever he was standing up for wasn't *his*. It wasn't a rule of his, or a side. It was something you were already on the side of, and he was only reminding you. Almost as if he was giving voice to your own conscience. You knew you couldn't win against it—and more importantly, you didn't want to.

What is that thing whose side you are both on; that two people who agree on nothing can both be serving? Hold the question.

If you had to guess: is *this* the kind of person who sneaks around trying to get away with stuff?

Both people may have stopped your misbehavior, and so both will leave confident that what they did “worked.” But one of them made it easier to turn away from what you knew, and the other made it harder. That change might be small, but it will long outlast this interaction.

And it won't feel like a change to who you are—it will feel like something you've learned about the world: whether it's the kind of place where people look out for each other, or one where they pursue their own self-serving needs. You don't notice that something has been *taken* from you.

Later, you may face a small choice—say, whether to give a stranger the benefit of the doubt—and that change will inform your decision. And if you make the “wrong” choice, it won't *feel* wrong. It will just feel like what you must do to protect yourself in this rotten world. What any sensible person would do.

We never say “I'm going to ignore my conscience.” It just feels like the world is forcing our hand. Our justifications simply feel more convincing, more obvious, more *righteous*—as though they *are* our conscience. The two become harder to tell apart.

Notice what this means. The two strangers could have said nearly identical things, and yet they produced opposite outcomes. One will have left the world a slightly better place, and the other, a worse one. And yet there will be no objective evidence of any difference. In fact, the evidence shows that the second stranger was *harsher*—and so he should have been the one that made it worse.

The Cause

So what exactly did the first stranger do to cause this?

Notice how there's nothing you can point to and say “that's it.” We intuitively know that being made to feel that *this is all you are* is harmful—but he never once said those words. And yet you could sense it immediately.

And contempt conveys something deeper, too. When we believe that *this is all you are* about someone, how does that license us to treat them? Is there any bottom to it? When we no longer see them as a full being like ourselves, harming them doesn't quite register as harm. So it doesn't just make them feel *bad*. It registers as a primal threat.

And there's more. Recall how it would have played out had you tried to exonerate yourself. Suppose you'd denied it. Or gotten angry. Or stayed perfectly calm. Or apologized. What happens?

Deny it, and you're the kind of person who does. Get angry, and that's proof too. Stay calm, and you don't even care. Apologize, and it's too convenient. Every road funnels into the same conclusion.

So contempt doesn't just permit harming someone who "deserves" it. It works at preventing them from escaping that conclusion—and from where you stood, you could feel that.

We all know this is how it works, on some level. But did he know it *while* he was doing it?

Before we answer that, notice where the two answers lead. If he knew it fully, then he sounds like a mustache-twirling villain. If he didn't know it at all, then what's there to hold him responsible for?

There's a third answer—and it's what the book is about.

The Tell

On one hand, what he was doing certainly *felt* intentional, didn't it? Something about his tone and gaze gave it away, even if his words didn't. And the longer it went on, the more obvious it was that wasn't accidental. He was tracking your reactions, navigating around obstacles, and preventing you from wriggling out and exonerating yourself.

It's as if some part of him *needed* you to be what he said you were, and was working hard at proving it. Can you feel that?

On the other hand, how could it actually *be* intentional? If he knew he was planning to use your reactions against you, how could he then turn around and sincerely hold them against you? You can't trust evidence that you know you yourself planted.

So he couldn't be fully aware of his own need, let alone that he was actively working to fulfill it. To him, it didn't feel like a need; it just felt obviously true.

But notice that his behavior couldn't have been purely unconscious either. If it were, he'd be embarrassed or confused if you pointed it out. Instead, it *intensified* in exactly the way needed to keep itself hidden—meeting each objection so that both conclusions stayed standing: that you were bad, and that he was only seeing it.

What does that remind you of?

Limbo. He had to be present enough to steer around obstacles, yet absent enough to believe the story in which he was only responding to what you are.

So you weren't just sensing that he's the kind of person who deceives himself in general. You were sensing that he was doing it right then, in the act of judging you. He was judging you *from* the very state he was judging you *for*.

So he knew what he was doing, and he didn't. But why did he need limbo to do it? Limbo is for things we know are wrong. What's wrong with steering a bad person into revealing what they already are?

The Why

From his perspective, nothing. Sure, he may recognize that his behavior is a bit provocative, but so what? You're *irredeemable*, after all—and so nothing he's doing could change that. He can't fix you, and he can't make you worse. All he can do is shame or scare you into stopping, which is what he's doing. It's a *good* thing!

And yet something in him still registers it as wrong. Why?

Here's a clue: look at how hard he's working. Why does he so desperately need you to be bad—unless *some part of him suspects you aren't*? That you don't deserve this?

He doesn't know exactly *why* he suspects it, but that signal keeps coming, and he keeps overriding it. Which means he now knows another thing: that he's the kind of person who's willing to override his conscience—and to proclaim it as righteous. Remember, limbo always contains knowledge of itself, in limbo.

And that creates a bigger problem. Because how does he know that you aren't just doing the same thing? That you're not just like him? **He doesn't.**

Which means he might be harming a *fundamentally redeemable person*. Driving them further from the one part of them that actually cares about doing right, when he could be helping them toward it instead. He tells himself he's just "serving justice", even though deep down he knows—as we all do—that there's a better way to accomplish that.

That's what he's in limbo about: the fact that *you're* merely in limbo, too.

Something in him senses that he might be making you a worse person to keep his own dark behavior hidden. And the more he realizes this, the more he's forced to turn away from that recognition; to prove to himself and the world that you're fundamentally *other*. And what's the best way to do that?

To keep doing exactly what he's doing and ensure that you see it.

The How

Have you ever been on the receiving end of a dehumanizing gaze? Doesn't it feel like the person is somehow absent or "turned away" from themselves?

That's what you're seeing in him. He's absent from the part of himself that would have *seen* you, registered you.

Being turned away from himself; from his conscience; from the part of him that would have seen you—they're all the same thing. And here's the tragedy of it: the part that would have warned him that he's turned away

is the very part he's turned away from. *Our conscience is the only thing that warns us when we've strayed from it.*

He can't see the state he's in for the same reason you *can* see it. The asymmetry is built right in. And yet, despite not fully seeing it himself, something in him is relying on you to recognize it for what it is. Why?

Because we **all** know it.

Try this: go out in public, find a stranger, and shoot them a dehumanizing gaze. It's hard to do, isn't it?

Notice what stopped you. It wasn't a rule, and it wasn't one voice among many that you weighed and happened to side with. It was that you could see them. That's all your conscience is: the part of you that keeps other people in view. Which is why acting against it was never like overruling an advisor. When you overrule it, you aren't ignoring arbitrary advice. You're turning away from *life itself*, seen in the eyes of another.

It's the same reason we feel that cheating is wrong (when we do). We're making ourselves an exception. Putting ourselves before others. And that's not something we could do if we were looking right at them. *Deeply* at them, so that we recognize what's behind their eyes as the same thing behind ours.

The only reason we ever turn away is to enable harmful behavior, and we cannot enable it without turning away. Check both directions in your own case.

How turning away *appears* in others is something we learn (though even a child recognizes it). But what it *is*, and what it's for, is something we know instinctively.

The Righteous Appearance

So he can rely on your recognizing it for what it is. But that's not quite enough to turn you into someone who appears *fundamentally other* like he needs, for a few reasons.

First, open malice might just provoke fear rather than your digging in. Second, it's difficult for him to do without making *him* feel like the bad guy. Third, even if he's okay with being the bad guy, your angry reaction wouldn't implicate you; it would implicate him, which is the opposite of what he needs right now.

That's where the second component comes in: the righteous appearance. Malice is frightening. Contempt is malice that believes it's righteous, and that makes it *maddening*.

So he needs to carefully balance both halves—ensuring that the dark signal comes through clearly, and that it's got just enough veneer of righteousness that it remains plausibly deniable. Neither you nor he must be able to pin it down. It cannot show up in any audit. He won't be able to see it later by merely thinking about it.

This is also what prevents us (the readers) from interpreting him as a mustache-twirling villain. The plan is, in fact, Machiavellian in design. But there's a crucial sense in which *he's* not the one executing it. He *cannot* be—not merely because he's a “good person,” but because the plan requires it. You can see it even though he doesn't. *Because* he doesn't. What you're seeing is *that* he doesn't—and it presents itself in such a way that you feel sure he does.

All of that is inherent to the state he's in, and is not something he needs to consciously design—though again: it's right there for him to see if he looks. In other words, the particular limbo we call contempt functions simply by telegraphing itself.

And notice that he does not have to (in fact, cannot) willfully enter it. All he has to do is genuinely believe you're bad. Once that's done, he can't help but feel contempt. And then you, perceiving it as willful, feel an almost irresistible urge to enter that state yourself. Which then his conscious mind will register as “evil” for the same reason you did. He can *see* it in you, and this time it's in response to behavior he can be 100% sure is righteous. Any doubt he had about you is now erased.

And there's one way to deal with people like that.

The Loop

So that's what he (or this part of him) is doing to you. But it creates a problem—because the more he does this, the more some part of him realizes that *he's the bad guy*.

Which increases the pressure to prove he's nothing like you. Which he can only do by revealing to you that he *is*. Which makes you increasingly sense the whole thing as a ruse, threatening to expose it. Which forces him to hide it even harder, by overlooking your humanity even more. Which his conscience registers and warns him about.

Which increases the pressure to prove he's nothing like you...

There is no natural stopping point—because as much as he tries, he never stops hearing his conscience. And the more he suppresses it, the more he's forced to see this plan all the way through. To push you all the way to the end, where (he believes) his conscience will finally bend itself to his perception.

The Tragedy

The tragic irony is, he's seeing *genuine darkness* in you—your own capacity to turn away. And he's not wrong in his desire to end it. Doing so would be genuinely beneficial—for you, for him, and for the world. What he doesn't see is his own need to externalize it; to view it as something utterly foreign to him.

And that is what makes him forget there's a better way. That he could do what the second stranger did.

The Agent

Now we come to the strangest part: what, exactly, is it in him that's doing all this?

Whatever it is, it seems intentional; calculating; goal-driven. It aims. It reads your reactions. It closes every road but one. It shows you a man with nobody home. It leaves no mark on any record. And it does all of that while he stands there certain he is doing you a favor.

And it *presents itself as such* to you while hiding itself from him. Not just *while* hiding itself from him, but *by* hiding from him. In fact, it reveals to you *that it is* hiding itself from him.

So it can't exactly be him in the usual sense. He *cannot* be fully aware of its operation, or else the behavior would collapse. At the same time, it's not as though he's unconscious or in a haze. He feels fully lucid, entirely like himself.

It is him—but not all of him, and not in the way he understands himself. It is as if, by turning away from himself, another part of him has taken control.

So what the heck is it?

It behaves like an agent, so I'll refer to it as one. I'll also call it his "dark" part, or just his "darkness"—both because it's hidden from him, and because of what we're about to see. But don't mistake the grammar for the claim: I am not saying there is a literal thing inside him.

We all do it. We don't want to believe that about ourselves, because of what it seems to imply, and not wanting to believe it is what keeps us from looking at what it really is.

The Taunt

It's showing you what it is doing in a way that renders it totally unmistakable, yet without giving you anything to grab onto to prove it.

It's like a parallel layer of communication happening *beneath* the words—one that can't be recorded on any ledger or in any transcript, and yet is louder than the stuff that can.

Could you have named what was happening out loud? What would you have said—*you're being mean*? How would that have turned out?

You both knew that, too.

So his dark part is doing his “dirty work” for him. And it doesn’t merely act *on* you. It *addresses* you—without giving you anything to address in return. It communicates something like this:

We both know exactly what I’m doing to you, and that nobody can prove it. Which means anything you try to do to wriggle out of it will be turned against you—because even “I” won’t know what I’ve done wrong.

*I know **exactly** how maddening that is, and what it will drive you to do. And when you inevitably do it, I’ll be right here, waiting to do it again.*

I am going to provoke you until you become the very thing I need you to be. Which means that when I’m finally forced to do to you what I must, nobody will feel sorry for you—because you’ll only have shown them what you really are.

I know you can see this, but you can’t prove it. Good luck.

Which you know but cannot prove, turning you into what he needs you to be.

Which is precisely the “what” that he was doing to you in the first place. But good luck proving it.

His darkness is **seducing** you to embrace your own. To listen to the part that can prove over the part that knows. To trust your reasons over your conscience.

And it can all be communicated through his tone, his gaze, his manner. We all know what it means on some level, even if we’ve never put it into words before. And it only works *because* we all know it, but cannot prove it.

You may have felt this before, as a kind of “hall of mirrors” effect, where you both know what’s happening, and that neither one of you can name it.

It feels like this on the receiving end: *if this is the kind of world we live in—where people can be cruel and the world calls it “righteous”; where we all know what’s happening but pretend not to—then fuck it. Game on.*

That’s what teaches you to do it too. To demote that inner knowing—because what is it worth?

In fact, the very notion of a conscience—that one faculty you have to detect this corruption of your mind—starts to feel naive. It’s the same faculty that let you see him. That sees anyone. Demote it, and you see a little less of everyone.

Remember how one side had to argue and the other didn’t? The arguments weren’t there to convince your conscience. They were there to convince *you* that it was just one more voice among the noise. That’s what’s happening now.

And the thing is, it doesn’t feel like a loss at all. It feels like you’ve gotten a bit wiser. A little more realistic about how this world operates.

He feels good being proven right, in real time, by you. And from the inside, being proven right and being right are the same experience. The only difference is who produced the evidence, and that’s the part he can’t see.

And look at what he thinks he’s been proven right about. Not that you’re careless, or rude. That the thing behind everything wrong with the world just showed itself in front of him—and he’s the one who caught it. Which is why it never mattered how small the thing you did was. It only had to be *evidence*.

Which is why he can’t see what he’s doing. Certainty, urgency, the sense that he must not let this go—those are what facing real evil actually calls for. What’s missing is his felt connection to what they were meant to serve.

Life. The thing he was overlooking in you. The thing he's disconnected from in himself.

The reasoning part of his mind cannot see this. That's why, when he consults it later, he won't realize what's happened.

He just watched you get worse in response to his "righteous" behavior, convincing him that people really are as rotten as he feared. So he gives that part of himself more power; learns to trust it more.

A part that's making his enemies *more* entrenched. Harder to fight. Creating more of the very thing he hates. If he were *fully conscious* of what it is creating: could he really want it?

So whose goals is it pursuing, exactly? His—or its own?

And yet it certainly *looks* like he wants it, doesn't it?

And what do we call people who obviously want to cause harm—especially when pretending it's good? How do we treat them?

We call them *bad people*, and treat them with *contempt*.

Which settles what he is. And once that's settled, whatever we do to him isn't harm anymore. It's what he *deserves*.

That's the license.

And treating him that way gives that part of him *more* power, because you'll have done to him the very thing he did to you.

His dark part: it benefits from you seeing it as something he wants. As something he is.

That's how it keeps itself alive: by convincing him it doesn't exist in him, while ensuring you see it as him. And the more power it gets, the more convincingly it looks like it is him.

This is why none of us ever recognize it operating in ourselves. It hides itself perfectly from our own minds while revealing itself to others,

compelling them to righteously attack us for it, thereby enabling ours to hide itself better from us.

That's its one trick, and it has no other: to keep us from looking in the one place where we could actually end it. The only thing it can't survive is being looked at directly. Why that should be, I'll come to.

That's what contempt for people **is**: a way to make our targets feel unsafe, so they can't actually *look* at the thing blocking them from the part that cares. So that they feel they *need* it, keeping them trapped in the dark, so that we never have to confront the same thing blocking *us*.

And it only works because some part of us already know this, at some level, but we don't *let* ourselves know it—both individually, and at the collective level.

The dark part of us: it doesn't “want” us to know this.

When You Send It

We all know what it is to hide from our own conscience. What it's like to pretend that we're not. And *to tell ourselves that others can't see it, even though part of us **needs** them to*.

Haven't you ever watched an enemy squirm under your “righteous” gaze—half-knowing that they would recognize it for what it is, and how their reaction would convict them, not you?

Think of an example. Somebody who had it coming. Bring back the moment itself: the thing you said, or didn't have to say. There was a flash in it. You felt it go out of you, and you felt it land. It didn't feel dark. It felt like justice, a little sweeter than justice needs to be. Whatever you showed them in that moment, you can still feel the shape of it. Hold it there.

Now the harder case. Sometimes we do it to the people we love. The *what's wrong with you?* that needs them to know they're broken. The sigh that lets them know what you really think of them in that moment, dressed up to

make you seem like the reasonable one. The look on their face that tells you it landed, which you'll pretend not to have seen.

You wouldn't consciously endorse that they're defective. But for one second something flashed through your eyes—the same something—and you made sure they saw it, and then you went back to loving them as if nothing had happened. Nothing was recorded. That isn't an accident. Hiding is the thing's whole job.

You had to be present enough to actually do it, while also absent enough to deny having been present—so that when you looked back on it later, your hands would be clean.

For it to sting the way you needed it to, you had to know they would recognize it for what it was. Which they do, because they've been on the delivering end too.

Now look at what you knew in that moment. You knew how it would land. You noticed that it landed. You knew they could recognize what you were doing. And you knew they'd have a hard time proving it without handing you more evidence. In fact, you yourself would have a hard time proving it later. You didn't have to calculate that sequence. It's there in a flash.

We all know this is how it works. We have to, or else it wouldn't work.

Now, before you look away from that memory, because something in you is starting to: notice why it's hard to look at. It isn't hard because of what you did, which may have been nothing much. It's hard because you don't want to believe you have that in you. Look at what the reluctance is made of. Check whether, from here, looking at the flash without the reasons, you want it. If you don't, that isn't a defense. Whatever is under the hiding is the part that's refusing it, and it was there in the moment too, or there would have been nothing to hide from.

What is the “something” that flashed through your eyes, that you had to make sure they saw?

What It Is

Whatever it was you needed them to recognize, it wasn't just harshness. That's just a story we tell ourselves to prevent us from looking at what it really is. The second stranger was harsher, and it landed as a reminder.

What you showed them, for a second, was that you'd stopped seeing them. That they'd been moved out of view—and you let them watch you do it. Why does that sting, in a way harshness alone doesn't?

Go back to what contempt licenses. A person who's out of view is a person anything can be done to. There's no bottom. So a flash of it, even for someone you love, is a flash of **the thing with no bottom**. They read it that way because everyone does. And you were counting on them reading it that way.

Now look at what it does to them. Think back to what the first stranger's contempt did to you. It taught you something about the world: that it's the kind of place where people look out for each other only until it costs them, and then all bets are off. And that informed a choice you made later, toward someone else. Holding the life in one person out of view teaches them to hold it out of view *in general*, and some part of us knows this.

At the same time—and this cannot be said too often—describing it as “you” risks creating shame. There is a sense in which it is more like an *it* revealing itself *through* you. Because if we recognized it for what it was, we simply wouldn't allow it.

It's the thing we call **evil**. Not as a judgement, but as the very essence of what “evil” *means*: to turn away from the life in front of us in order to pursue our own ends. The stranger wasn't just registering that his behavior was “a bit provocative.” He was registering that he was unleashing *the thing*.

Here's the cover it most often uses, speaking through us: *My darkness isn't real darkness—it's the kind all good people must harbor to keep bad people in check. They just take it the wrong way, because of course they would.* We may sincerely believe that at the level of reasons, but the contempt itself

gives us away. We know there is ultimately only one kind of “evil,” and we depend on our enemies to recognize it, and to know that we know they recognize it. We rely on it being common knowledge to work.

The closest thing to a “good kind” is the fierce kindness the second stranger showed you. We confuse “fierce” with “dark” not because we truly don’t know the difference, but because we *need* to not know it. Or, viewed from the perspective of the darkness: *it* needs us to keep believing that we don’t know it.

Notice how even the smallest flicker can feel dangerous to admit—out of proportion to its size. As though some part of you knows that the smallest morsel contains the structure of the whole. That’s why you didn’t want it seen, and why it’s hard to see now.

When it’s in control, notice how it commandeers your reasoning mind. *It’s not evil, it’s good! Or who’s to say what’s really good or bad? If it stops bad people, it’s by definition good!* That’s why nobody records the flash. The reason is what gets filed. And notice that I’m not arguing with the reason. Stopping bad people surely *is* good. But the “who’s to say” is evidence of the smokescreen. The thing that lets you confuse conscience with reasons and then later tell yourself you didn’t. It’s also why you can’t simply reason your way out of this state.

Look at what it requires: turning away from yourself. The part of you that exists underneath all your self-deception: it doesn’t seem to want any of this.

Which leaves the question: you revealed genuine darkness while knowing what you were doing. How can that mean anything but that some part of you *is* it? I’ll give you the shape of the answer now, so you can keep reading, and spend the rest of the book earning it: something was using you, the same something you watched in him, and you’re fully responsible, and both are true at once. What makes that hard to hold is that knowing it is what makes it unbearable to look at. So you don’t look. And not looking is what makes you look worse to everyone else, who then mistreat you, and you

have to answer them. Nobody consciously designed that trap. Everyone's caught in it.

Even profoundly malicious behavior does not mean you're inherently bad, and it doesn't absolve you of responsibility. Seeing this is the only thing that makes full responsibility safe enough to bear. That safety is what the first stranger was robbing you of. It's what the second stranger was providing. And it's what this book exists to provide you.

The world has gotten slightly worse as a result of your interaction with that stranger, and yet there's not a trace of objective evidence of anything wrong ever having happened. And the objective facts are what we have learned to trust *more*. So the very thing causing the problem has hidden itself better.

It's not that the deeper part of you has been silenced. That's not how it works.

It's still there in you, quietly knowing what it knows, patiently waiting to be remembered.

Just as it is in him.

I cannot prove any of this to you, but I suspect some part of you already knows it. If you recognized it, that's the evidence.

Interlude One

Before going any further I want to send you back over some of what you just did. Not to repeat it. To look at a few parts more closely than we could while they were happening.

Five things worth going back for

1. What you actually knew.

Go back to the thing you brought to mind at the start of the chapter, the one you did while not letting yourself know it. Chapter 1 said, in passing, what the wrong thing was: you'd made yourself an exception, and you couldn't have done it while looking at the people it cost. Check whether that's the flavor of it. Not *someone will suffer*. Just *this doesn't apply to me*.

And yet that's not quite the whole of it, because making an exception of yourself isn't always wrong. Take the last seat when your back is ruined. Say no to someone who needs you, on a day when you have nothing left. Feed your own child first. All exceptions, and your conscience doesn't make a sound.

So try this instead of a definition. Picture taking that last seat while looking the other person in the eye. You can. It's fine. Now picture cheating that way, with the people it costs standing right there in front of you, watching, while you do it.

You can't get the picture to hold. Something has to be somewhere else.

That's what your conscience registered. Not the exception.

One thing before this turns into a way of torturing yourself. You will not always know. Sometimes you take the seat and genuinely can't tell whether you needed it more, and sometimes there's nothing there at all and you'll go hunting anyway. Not every self-interested act has a turning-away inside it. A book that leaves you interrogating whether you're evil for staying seated on a bus has done you harm, not good.

So here's the honest version. In the cases you're likely to worry about, you won't be squinting. When it's there and you're anywhere near yourself, you know, and you have never once needed help identifying it.

The dangerous cases are the opposite kind. They're the ones where you feel nothing at all and are completely certain. Because the further you drift from that signal, the fainter it seems, and the thing that would notice how faint it's gotten is the same thing you're drifting from. It never actually goes quiet. It only comes to seem absent, more and more, while you take your bearings from something else and never register the swap.

If you're anxious about whether you're evil for staying seated on a bus, that anxiety is not the signal. The signal doesn't feel like that.

2. Where you'd felt that before.

Now the stranger. You read him in about two seconds, on no evidence at all, and you'd have bet at any odds. What you read was that he was making himself an exception, which is what you'd known about yourself minutes before and couldn't have put into words. So you spotted it in him using the one faculty you had just spent that whole episode refusing to turn on yourself. *This doesn't apply to me* and *you're not really one of us* are one thing seen from two ends.

3. The harder version of the experiment.

Earlier I asked you to find a stranger and give them a dehumanizing look, and you found you couldn't do it, not while actually looking at them.

You might think that's about intensity. That the look was too extreme, and something milder would go through easily. So try the mild version. Not the worst thing you could do to that stranger. The smallest. A flicker of dismissal. A half-second of superiority. The most trivial unkindness you can imagine, with them fully in view.

Notice it doesn't go through either.

Which tells you the block was never about size. It was about whether you were looking at them. While you were, nothing was available to you, large or small. Something had to go before anything could.

That's what you found in your own case. I think it's true of everyone, and of every harm there is, and I haven't shown you that.

Now the other side of it, because so far this has all been about what you can't do. Go back to the moment in the experiment before you tried to give the look, when you were only looking at them. Notice what was missing. Not just that you wouldn't have harmed them. The option wasn't in the room, and it didn't feel like restraint, because there was nothing there to hold back.

Notice what was there instead. If they had objected to something, the objection would have landed on you. You'd have had to answer it, not manage it. If they had been hurt, it would have been bad, in the way your own hurt is bad, and not merely bad for them. And what was going on in them could have changed what you did next.

That doesn't arrive as three separate facts. It arrives as one: somebody is there.

I want you to have touched it, so that when I say *seeing*, or say that somebody is *in view*, you know which thing I mean.

4. Where the verdict had to end up.

Look again at what the first stranger needed you to be. It couldn't stop at *you did something wrong*. It couldn't even stop at *you're careless* or *you're a liar*. It had to reach *this is what you are*.

Ask why nothing short of that would do.

I think it's because anything short of that leaves you a person, and he can't do what he's doing to a person. A person's objection would land on him; he'd have to answer it. So the verdict has to keep going until there's nothing left in you that he'd feel obliged to answer.

5. What it was like from inside his eyes.

One more, and this one is about you.

Think of somebody you once despised and later came to see differently. Go back to when you despised them. Were you *interpreting* them as rotten? Or were you just seeing it?

Hold onto that. It's going to matter more than it looks.

Where that leaves us

Most of that needs a chapter, and some of it needs the whole book. But you should know where you stand. So here is an honest accounting, in three piles: what you saw, what I make of it, and what I'm asking you to take on trust for now.

What you saw.

That you knew a thing was wrong before you'd worked anything out, and that what you knew was that you'd stepped outside something that held for everyone.

That you couldn't give a stranger that look while you were looking at him, however small a version of it you tried.

That one man, in your imagination, made it easier to turn away from what you knew, and another made it harder, and you could feel the difference before either of them had finished a sentence.

What I make of it.

These are inferences. Chapter 1 argued for each of them, but you didn't observe them. You observed the things above.

That the state you read in him matched the one you had just recalled in yourself. He was imagined, so what you actually did was build a man from the inside, and what came out matched what you had just caught yourself doing. That tells you the faculty knows what the state looks like from the outside because it has been on the inside. Whether the reading would be accurate in a real encounter is a further question, and one I owe you.

That nothing in what either man said accounts for the difference between them.

That his verdict couldn't have stopped anywhere short of *this is what you are*.

That whatever was running the first man could not have gone on running if he'd turned and looked straight at it.

That it does better when you mistake it for him. He defends it as his own judgment, and you go after the man, because the man is what you can see.

That what you did when you cheated and what he did to you are one move from two ends. *This doesn't apply to me. You're not really one of us.*

The trap, in one piece.

Now put the inferences together, because assembled they're more than a list.

He couldn't have fully known what he was doing. If he'd admitted to himself that he was producing the evidence against you, the evidence would have been worthless to him. And he couldn't have been completely blind to it either, because it tracked every attempt you made to expose it and got stronger in exactly the way it needed to stay hidden. So it had to be the third thing, the one you know from the inside: the knowledge available enough to steer and protect itself, and unadmitted enough that he could still feel innocent. And at the bottom of what he was holding down wasn't what he was doing to you. It was the fact that you're the same kind of thing he is. What he did to you is what holding that down made possible.

That state can't be concealed, and not because it leaks around the edges. What he had to keep from himself is exactly what reached you.

And it reached you as a provocation. Your reaction wasn't a side effect he'd have preferred to avoid. It was one of the things the whole performance was for, and what it needed above all was that nothing you did should be allowed to clear your name. So the one thing he couldn't afford was for you to get better and have it count.

Take any link out and the whole thing stops. If he'd admitted his part there'd be no evidence; if it were blind, no tracking; if it could be hidden, no provocation; if your getting better could count, no verdict. That's why I call it a trap and not a bad habit. A habit is something you could drop. This holds itself together, and the shape it makes is the one you met on the street.

I think it's the same trap, at a different dose, in every act of contempt there is, yours and mine included. That's the claim of this book, and I'm asking you to take it on trust for now. Chapter 1 worked out the mechanism of one encounter. It didn't show that every encounter has it.

What people already know, and what I think is new.

None of the conclusions in this book are new: that we make other people out to be bad so that we can feel good, that a person can hide from himself, that shaming somebody makes them worse. People have known all of that for a long time, and some of them have measured it. If it sounds familiar, that's because it is, and I'd rather stand with that company than pretend otherwise.

What I don't think anyone has said is what actually passes between two people in that moment. That the hiding is itself the message. That what you read in him wasn't a mood but the way he was standing in relation to what he knew. That it has to be deniable or it doesn't work at all. That it only works because both of you already know what it is, so the story that it was the good kind is refuted by the fact that it worked. And that it teaches you something, which is the piece I most want you to hold onto: that the part of you which knew is not worth listening to. Everything larger in this book comes out of that last one.

And I think this is one reason it's so hard to describe, and why the accounts that come closest stop where they stop. The people who came closest, and where each one stopped, are in Appendix 2. You can only see it while holding on to both halves at once: he knew, and he didn't let himself know. Collapse that to "he simply knew" and you've got a villain, and

contempt follows. Collapse it to “he had no way of knowing” and you’ve got an accident, and going easy on him follows. Both leave out half of what happened. It only stays in view while you hold both halves.

What I’m asking you to hold.

Four claims I can’t earn from one encounter, stated plainly so you know what you’re carrying. I’m not going to defend them here. Each of them gets its own part of the book. Hold them the way you’d hold a friend’s account of something you weren’t there for: provisionally, and with the right to put it down.

The people we call evil are further along this same road, not on a different one.

The dark part in him and the dark part in you are on the same side, and contempt is what they feed each other.

You are not it, and the shame you feel when you catch it at work is how it keeps you from looking. Chapter 1 said that outright, at the end, and gave you the shape of it. It hasn’t earned it.

The only stance that doesn’t feed the trap is the second stranger’s. Other things sometimes help. But anything that carries contempt is acting out the very thing it’s trying to end, and his stance is the only one that doesn’t.

There’s a fifth, about what’s underneath all of this, and I’m going to hold it until the end, because it isn’t something you can check from here.

The question that leads forward.

You can’t harm somebody you’re looking at, and you can’t argue anybody into looking. So what does it? What turns a person back toward what they already know?

You already have the answer, because it was done to you. The second stranger did it without making a single argument. The rest of this book is an attempt to say what he did.

What I haven't shown you

You're taking four claims on trust. Here is what I owe you on them, and two more debts besides.

I haven't shown you that the people we call evil are further along this same road. You've seen one route to harm and no counterexample, which is suggestive and nothing more. There's an obvious candidate for a counterexample, too: the one who wants the suffering and stays to watch it. I'll take that case head on when we get to them, and I'll say what would settle it against me.

How much rides on it is less than it looks. Suppose I never make that case. Suppose you finish this book unconvinced that the worst people are made of what you're made of. There is still something you can check without me, and it's the thing I actually care about. Next time you settle it that somebody is beyond reach, watch what happens in you when the verdict lands. In me, something eases. Something wanted that.

You may not catch it the first time. It's quick, it doesn't announce itself, and the whole encounter is arranged so that you're looking at him. If you do catch it, look at whether it has anything to do with wanting the harm to stop.

I haven't shown you anything about your own contempt for somebody who really hurt you. In this chapter you got caught doing something you actually did. Being hurt by someone when you'd done nothing at all is a different seat. The mechanism is the same. The seat isn't, and it gets its own chapter.

I haven't shown you that any of this survives past two people on a street. And I haven't told you what's underneath the caring, beyond the fact that it's there and that it's enough. That's next.

And now the thing I owe you most, which is a real way to say no.

You may have gone back to those memories honestly and found something different from what I described. Not a failure to look. A different finding.

Maybe the knowing you had was a rule after all, and it fired fast. Maybe the stranger's tell was a manner you'd learned to read, and it didn't feel to you like a verdict. Maybe you can, in fact, picture doing a small unkindness to somebody while looking straight at them, and you'd be telling the truth.

If so, then one of three things is true. The mechanism I've described is narrower than I've been claiming, and applies to some encounters and not others. Or your experience differs from mine in a way that matters, and I've been generalizing from too small a sample. Or I'm wrong.

I don't know which. What I can promise is that none of those makes you the kind of reader who couldn't see. A book about contempt that treated its doubters as turned-away would be doing the thing it's about. So: if you looked and it isn't there, that's a finding, and it counts against me, and you should carry it forward as evidence rather than set it aside.

What I believe is that it's there. That's why I'm writing. But I'm going to try to earn that over the rest of the book rather than assume it now, and if you're reading with the finding that it isn't, you're reading the way I'd want.

Chapter 2: The Descent

The part that cares

Something inside you cares. Profoundly. About other people, about other beings, about the world around you.

You've felt it when looking into the eyes of a child. Or a stranger's, if you hold it long enough. Their face stops being something you're looking at and becomes a place somebody is looking out of: a whole person in there, with a childhood, and a private fear, and their own particular way of being tired. What you feel then isn't a thought. It's closer to recognition: *this one is like me*. And right behind it, before you've decided anything: *I want that to be all right*.

You know how deep it goes. The stranger who dives in after somebody else's child. They're not thinking about what it will do for them. They're in contact with something much deeper inside themselves—something they wouldn't know how to get rid of even if they tried, or wanted to.

And there are times when you've felt it not for just one person, but for **all of it**. When you don't just want your life to go well, or this particular person's life to go well: you want Life to go well. All of it. And it would fight for that. It isn't soft. It's the fiercest thing in you.

Ask whether there's anything you'd give your life for, and notice that the answer arrives before you've thought, and that it's never *my idea of what's good*.

It's related to what we've been calling your "conscience," but it's so much bigger than just telling you right from wrong. It's the part of you that senses its way toward what matters; what's good, even if it can't quite pin it down. It's the only part of you that does this. Chapter 1 left you holding a question: what is the thing you and the second stranger were both on the side of, when you might have agreed about nothing else? This is it. It doesn't belong to a religion or a side, because you recognized it in him across every difference you could name. Just as there is something

everyone recognizes as evil, there is this, and we all recognize it too. Some traditions call it basic goodness. I'll mostly call it the light, and I'll say what I mean by that as we go. For now it means only this: the thing that would go into the water.

We already believe that the light is more fundamental, and our language gives us away. When someone we love turns bitter or cruel and then, without being caught, sees it and stops, we don't say they turned into somebody else. We say they came back. When a generous person becomes callous, we say they lost themselves. Deep down. Better than this. Not himself. Came to his senses. One direction feels like recognition and the other like departure.

You can check that in your own case. Go back to the thing from the start of Chapter 1 and look at it now, without the reasons. Is there something that says *that's not who I want to be*? If there is, notice that it isn't an excuse; the excuses were what you told yourself at the time. It's the one report that survives the honesty. Both were you. One was an impostor. Which one you'd call yourself is the asymmetry, and you didn't learn it from me.

That's the first thing to hold. Not that you can't do wrong, but that there's an asymmetry. Care is what you're like when nothing is in the way. Wrong is what you're like when something is.

That's what the darkness hijacks, by masquerading as it.

Here's what I'll say about that, and you've seen every piece of it; Chapter 4 makes the case properly. There's a voice in each of us that produces reasons to overrule what we know; you met it at the start of Chapter 1. Follow it, and the turning away opens a gap, and the gap shows. That's what you saw in the dehumanizing gaze, and in the stranger: not something added, something absent.

But it still behaves like a presence—an eerie one—because the person's faculties are all still running, aimed at a goal the part that cares would never have chosen. Something else is steering that isn't quite them.

From the inside, it doesn't feel dark. Most of the time it feels mundane, and sometimes it feels righteous. It seduces them by feeling like the light. They don't realize it because the thing they're disconnected—or turned away—from is also the only thing that could have warned them that they are turned away. And the more turned away they are, the more their behavior reproduces this disconnect in others, even as they're flawlessly convinced they're helping. They can even *prove* it.

You watched that happen to you with the stranger: the harm nudged you toward forgetting there was a light at all.

Our belief that goodness can be pinned down: that's what the dark part exploits. Any which way you try to define it, the darkness will find a way to obey the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. If violence is always wrong, what do you do when it's actually necessary? If harming bad people is right, then watch how quickly “bad” and “harm” expand to cover exactly who you need them to cover.

So the easiest way for it to win is to make us focus only on what we can define. To disconnect the part that reasons from the part that cares. And we never notice it happening.

This is where I think humanity as a whole is caught—and we keep trying to rely on the part that proves to guide us back. It **cannot work**.

It's why “bad people” can never tell they're the bad guys. And it's why we can never tell that treating them with contempt is the wrong solution.

I can't promise there's a way to bring them back. But I can promise you that the belief that there isn't—it doesn't originate from the part of you that cares.

This is how broken systems get built. Not by bad people designing them, but by ordinary people, each of us slightly disconnected from the part that cares, each of us certain we're the ones who aren't. That's what the rest of this book has to show.

From the delivering end

Let's go back to the chilling taunt from the last chapter. How do I know it's accurate? *Because I've been on the delivering end more times than I'd like to admit.*

Here's what it feels like from the inside.

I **know** there's evil in the world—like a force that's completely alien to me. I know that, because I've seen what people are capable of. And *I'm* not capable of that.

So when I catch the faintest whiff of it in someone else—even something as minor as littering—I'm not simply going to let it go. It's *evidence* of something. I can feel it. And I'm going to expose it for what it really is.

What I'm doing is a public service. It's the least I can do as a *good person*.

At some level, I know that my tone isn't helping anything. That there's something dark about it that I can't quite place. But I don't *let* myself know.

And anyway, *my* darkness isn't *real* darkness—it's the strategic kind. The kind that all *good people* must harbor to keep **real** evil in check. I need them to *feel* it.

But for some reason, my target isn't taking it that way. He's *defiant*. Recalcitrant.

Ugh. I didn't want to believe this about him—but what choice has he left me? I was only trying to show him how much he should *care*, and look at how he went and took it.

The kid gloves must now come off.

Now a much more dramatic experience from my own life—the first that showed me the full depth of what lives inside me. You might find that it works best when read at a meditative pace.

The trip

In this experience, I was taken back to a memory where I had ruthlessly mocked someone for having a different political opinion than me—an opinion that I knew was harmful. That’s how I knew it was okay to do this to him. My goal was to stop him, and also dissuade others from following. And if it didn’t do that, well, at least he’d be made to feel bad for being bad.

I was then shown how my behavior had impacted him. How my cruelty had only fed his cynicism about the world. And I somehow saw, clear as day, how it was this same cynicism that drove him to hold that harmful opinion in the first place.

I hadn’t made him better—I had made him worse.

*Which meant that I couldn’t stop. If I let up and allowed him to reveal himself as fundamentally decent, then what would it say about how I’d been treating him? I couldn’t live with myself. So I had to do it **more**. I had to leave no doubt whatsoever that he really was as bad as I feared.*

None of this knowledge was conscious, exactly. It occupied a bizarre state of mind, in which I knew yet somehow didn’t. I had somehow convinced myself that by holding it in limbo, I would never have to face it. That I could simply call it “unconscious” and forgive myself for it later.

*I was then shown how foolish that was. **Look**, my mind commanded, **the knowledge exists right here. It always has, and it always will.***

It was pointing right at it. There was nothing I could do to deny it. The knowledge had been there all along. I saw the implication: just because I think I’ve gotten away with something doesn’t mean I have. It lives on in my psyche, influencing my behavior in ways I can’t quite see.

I felt profound guilt and shame. I realized I'm "that guy"—the one I'm sure is "what's wrong with the world." What kind of rotten person harms innocent others just to hide the fact that he is? Corrupts their minds, driving them toward more extreme beliefs, allowing me to judge them more? And what of all the harm he likely caused as a result?

And then I saw where it all went. The cynicism I had fed in him didn't stay in him. He carried it into the next argument, and the person on the other end of that one carried it further, and I watched it move outward through people I would never meet, each of them a little more certain that the world is the kind of place where you look out for yourself. I couldn't see the end of it. There wasn't one. Every step of it lowered the threshold, a little, for darkness to show up somewhere else, and somewhere else it did. I was shown atrocities I had read about in the news—things I had felt absolutely no connection to; things that had triggered my self-righteous outrage, and that I had used to justify piling on more—and I saw the thread running from them back to me. Not to me alone. To everyone who had ever done what I did. But the thread was real, and I was on it. At every step it was still mine. Not a share of it. Mine.

That's when the floor went. If a fundamentally decent person like me can cause malicious harm like this, how do I know that other people aren't doing the same? That the people I consider "bad" aren't just lost in a deeper version of the same trap?

I don't.

But it was more than that. I revisited what felt like every act of bad behavior I had ever seen. Some of it I had long recognized as the result of people hiding from what they knew. But somehow, in this place, the hiding of even the worst people was laid bare. It wasn't an inference, or something I was learning fresh. I had somehow always seen it—and yet chosen not to.

The motivation was obvious. It was the same reason I couldn't see it in my political enemy, but magnified. Because if even the worst people of the world are ultimately just like me, what does that do to my worldview? If my behavior

has been making the problem worse, what does that say about me? What leg does my arrogance have to stand on?

*I saw clearly how the deeper a person was caught in this trap, the more it felt like they weren't. Even as their behavior became more evil, and there was more knowledge of the harm it was causing, there was correspondingly more shielding—deeper limbo—making it feel increasingly **righteous**.*

*In the most extreme example—one that haunts me to this day—I was dropped into the experience of being **maximally** “turned away.” There was no perception at all of the decency of my victims. The **life** in them. They became objects—playthings. What remained was pure, unadulterated, predation. The malevolent joy of devouring innocence. And it was **impossibly. Fucking. Delicious.***

...

*I spent what felt like a lifetime in this hell, unable to forgive myself. Every instance of wrongdoing; every little thing I had been hiding from myself—and there were **far more** than I would have ever believed—came flooding back, forcing me to face my profound hypocrisy. The pain was unbearable.*

Slowly it began to dawn on me: why do I feel so rotten? Why do I feel such profound guilt?

Why do I have to shield myself from my misbehavior in the first place? Produce justifications for it? Why don't I have to do that with my good behavior?

*The answer came in a flash: because **I don't actually want to cause harm**. If I saw it clearly—fully, without any hiding—I simply could not do it. That's why the hiding is necessary.*

The revelation hit like lightning. Not as an idea or belief. Instead, the capacity to hide was simply stripped from me in that moment. Not by force, but by erasing all the pride, shame, fear... all that made me hide. And what remained—I can't put it into words. The closest word I have is Love. Not as an emotion, or for any particular thing. But for all of it.

Every time I've felt the urge to act with full integrity—to be of service to all of Life; to act for the greatest good—it was but the faintest whiff of what I felt in that moment. It was self-evidently what exists beneath all the noise.

I next recalled looking into the eyes of “evil people.” That dehumanizing gaze. How it had always felt like they were absent or “turned away” from themselves. Now I finally recognized what I had been looking at. Why they had to “turn away” to do what they did.

*The parallel with my earlier taunting of my enemy was impossible to miss. That terrifying predatory quality—it was **identical** in both cases, if vastly different in intensity. It carried the same flavor. That “righteous” enjoyment of causing harm.*

*Of **course** it had to feel righteous. Righteousness is what I actually wanted. The only way I was willing to turn away from it was if the counterfeit—the reasons I used to justify turning away—felt “righteous” too. The further I drifted, the more different the genuine and counterfeit felt—but only if I could compare them side-by-side. And yet the deeper I got lost, the less access I had to the real thing, so the less I could. No wonder it was so easy to lose one's way.*

The strangest thing is that none of this actually felt like new knowledge to me. I was simply remembering something I had always known—how all the horrors of the world were ultimately rooted in the same profound confusion. The same turning away. And it became obvious why I never let myself know it.

The knowledge that all the carnage of the world is caused by a mistake that I myself often make—and that my unkind behavior reinforces—is far too horrifying for my defended mind to handle. But as long as I avoid it, I have no choice but to treat evil as fundamentally alien to me—and to treat its perpetrators with contempt.

The lesson was clear: if I didn't get back on the “right track,” I would continue adding to the burden of the world, even as I was flawlessly confident I was helping. And there was always the possibility that I would slip past the point of

*no return. A place where others would see **me** as irredeemably evil, and in their confusion, shove me deeper in while feeling righteous for it.*

*And what was this “right track”? It was astonishingly simple. All I had to do was stop hiding things from myself. Stop willfully overlooking the **life** in others—my profound commonality, equality with them.*

Simple, perhaps, but far from easy. I knew it would be the work of a lifetime.

What the second stranger didn’t do

Now think back to what that second stranger did, and what it evoked in you.

How did he do it?

Do you think he was running a mental story of what a good person he was? How *virtuous*? If he was, you would have detected it, right? And then would it have had the same effect?

Look at what he had. He had you dead to rights, and every opening to twist the knife, and he didn’t take it—and didn’t seem to notice the opening was there. He didn’t have to stop himself. And he didn’t have to tell himself a story, unlike the first person. And it is the *absence of a story* that you detected. It’s how you knew he wasn’t running away himself. And he didn’t have to *do* anything to convey it—that absence conveyed itself too.

If either of the two people could be said to have “fought evil,” it’s clearly him. And yet where’s the evidence? There isn’t any. Nor does he even likely think of it that way, because he wasn’t looking at “evil.” He knows he was just seeing a form of confusion.

In the case of both strangers, something was *transmitted*—something difficult to pin down.

The mistake we agreed on

Think about what happens when we try to fight evil. We correctly identify that it requires being fierce—and then, almost without noticing, let it devolve into contempt. *Almost*.

Fierce is where the darkness finds it easiest to get in. From the outside, fierce and dark look alike, and it counts on our not wanting to tell them apart. And we can sense it getting in, from the sending end: that little something extra, added to the fierceness on its way out, that you knew they'd feel.

And it's not just a mistake that one particular "side" makes. It's something we've collectively agreed isn't a mistake at all. It's *righteous*. Necessary.

That mistake—what might it be serving?

Chapter 3: The Sacrifice

The satisfaction

There is nothing more primally, viscerally satisfying than violently punishing evil.

Pause and feel that—whether you’d consciously endorse the idea or recoil at it.

Now bring to mind someone who actually qualifies. Not a stranger who was rude to you, but someone whose harm was real. They could be from your own life, or maybe from the news.

Something in you wants them to *know*. Not just to be stopped—that isn’t enough. You want it to land on them, from the inside, what they *are*.

And how *does* it land on them? Do they back down—or do they treat it as a challenge and respond accordingly? You can almost see it strengthening their resolve.

Why? Because they’re evil, obviously, and that’s just what evil does.

You were *right* about them. Which means you’re also right about whatever you (or perhaps someone less squeamish) must do to them.

What you’re showing them

You probably already know where this is going.

Look at what you’re actually showing them. I’ll use my own language for it, and you can see if you recognize yourself in any of it. You don’t have to admit it to anyone but yourself.

*I know I could choose to rescue that part of you while still serving justice.
But I could also choose to quietly smother it, and no one will blame me
for it.*

Sound familiar?

I *haven't* “done anything.” Anything, that is, except license their darkness, so that I can taste that forbidden pleasure of violently punishing them for it. All so I can hide mine from myself.

How? By revealing that the thing that lives in them lives in me too, while also hiding from myself that I am, so that I genuinely won't have any idea that I was doing this.

The very idea will sound *preposterous* to me. Offensive even. Because, you see, I am a *good person*.

There's just one tiny problem: part of me **knows**.

In the moment, something in me registers my behavior as a bit underhanded. *But so what*, I tell myself, *sometimes you have to bend the rules a bit to fight evil*.

But it's not rules that I'm bending. My rules are what tell me not to be too harsh, or violent. But as we already saw, it wasn't the harshness that was the problem. It was that “little something extra” I couldn't help but inject into the interaction. The thing that revealed my darkness.

It's my deep inner knowing that I'm *violating*. The one thing whose violation shows them that I *am* violating it. *That's* what I'm counting on them to recognize—and I know they will, because at some level I know that's how they got where they are in the first place.

How *else* would they recognize my darkness for what it is? Why else would it so reliably empower theirs?

I know all this. I just can't afford to admit it.

Suppress, or provoke

On one level, I'm telling myself that I'm using my darkness to *suppress* theirs. Showing them what will happen if they don't stop. Scaring them into abandoning theirs.

On a deeper level, I know I'm using mine to *provoke* theirs—but it's still for a good cause. I'm not creating new evil, you see, just exposing what's already there.

But deeper still, something far more insidious is happening. Mine is **teaching** theirs to ingratiate itself to them. Showing them that it's controlling me; that even the so-called “good people” will embrace it when they can get away with it.

Proving to them that *genuine goodness is a myth*.

Something in me is doing everything in its power to prevent them from remembering that there's another part of themselves that they might turn toward—a part they've long since forgotten about, at least at the conscious level. Smothering their light, so that I can know they don't have any.

Because if they did ever turn back toward it, then *what would that make me?*

So I **cannot** risk it.

This is how my darkness hides itself from me. By reminding me that the *real* problem exists “out there,” where it's my righteous duty to viciously attack it. Which means mine wants a darker world, because a darker world is where it hides. And so does theirs. Whatever we're fighting about on the surface, underneath we want the same thing.

We all know this is happening, on some level. It's the same thing he could count on in the street: you know, I know you know, and neither of us will ever say so. Which is also why we must never acknowledge that it is.

So the full message I'm communicating actually goes something like this:

You will be our sacrifice. The communal dumping ground for our collective shadow. I'm sorry to have to do this to you—but it's the only way to keep our hands clean.

That certainly could convince someone to cozy up to their darkness, now couldn't it?

The sacrifice

None of this requires a decision. Nobody thinks: *we will put the part of ourselves we can't bear to see into this person*. The arrangement depends on our not thinking it.

But check whether some part of you knows it anyway.

In those times when the punishment feels a little too good. When you're more interested in what they *are* than in what they did. When their getting worse feels strangely welcome.

You know. And then you turn away.

And when everyone turns away in the same direction, the knowledge doesn't go anywhere. It just becomes the thing nobody can say.

Which means the person we've designated carries something for us. Not only their own harm, but ours. The part we couldn't hold.

Now consider what would happen if they changed.

Not surrendered. Not admitted anything. Just quietly became someone you could no longer see that way.

Something in you would resist it, wouldn't it? Not because you'd doubt it. Because you'd suddenly have to confront something in yourself. Something we'd all *really rather not ever have to face*.

The most dangerous thing our enemies can do to us is not to attack.

It is to *get better*.

That is the one thing we must never allow.

What that tells you

Now the part that matters most. *We absolutely couldn't do this if we clearly saw that we were*.

What does that tell you? Why would you not want to do this to others—even to “evil” others?

There. *That's* your humanity. The part that *cannot* want another person to hurt, when you can clearly see what that hurt entails.

Because you know that hurt from the inside. It's the thing you want to banish from this world.

And that's what the darkness relies on: our not seeing it for what it is. And it's not just what the darkness *needs*: it's what the darkness *is*.

Chapter 4: The Darkness

Is it you?

Now we must confront the question Chapter 1 gave you the shape of and asked you to carry. Something was using you, and you're fully responsible. But is it *you*? Watch what the mind does with that.

If it just is you, then it's very hard to avoid shame, especially as you discover the full extent of harm you've caused from within it. That prevents you from seeing it clearly for what it is, and doing what you must to end it. That only gives it more power.

But if it's *not* you—if it's something else, or some unconscious process—then how can you bear full responsibility? Bearing it means feeling the full weight of it: *yes, I did this—and I **knew** I was doing it.*

Our mind can't help but collapse the paradox to one side or the other. *That's what keeps the whole thing going.*

And look what happens when we apply it to our enemies.

If they fully knew and *only* knew, then they're just bad. Fundamentally defective. Beyond help. In that case, contempt is fully deserved. And we've already seen exactly where that leads. It's the mirror image of the shame case above: a way to prevent them from seeing it clearly and ending it.

But if they didn't know, then why hold them accountable at all? Maybe we should just go easy on them. This is close to what the popular misconception of compassion is: being soft and nice, and non-confrontational.

But genuine compassion holds both halves at once. We (and our enemies) are **fully responsible** for the harm we've caused—and at the same time deserve the grace necessary to actually let us see it clearly enough to end it, rather than forsaking us to the abyss where we're doomed to repeat it.

Is it real?

And another question: is the darkness *real*?

Look at what you already have. Everything the first stranger's dark part did, it did with borrowed equipment. It aimed with his eyes. It read your reactions with his perception. It closed every road with his intelligence. It felt certain using his conscience's own sense of what real evil calls for. Take away everything that is *him* and ask what's left of the darkness. Nothing. No hidden something that was steering him. Only the fact that all of that equipment was pointed slightly away—from you, and from himself.

You saw it from the other side, too. When you tried to give a stranger that gaze and couldn't, what stopped you wasn't a good part winning a fight with a bad part. It was that you were looking. You can't do it while looking. The darkness didn't lose. There was no fight, because there was nothing there to fight with.

That's its strange status. It isn't a thing. It's the not-looking. Which is why it's not quite our "willingness" to turn away. Willingness makes it sound like a choice, an evil one, and that just pushes the problem one level down, where you'd need a darkness to explain the darkness. Nobody chooses to stop looking while they're still looking. It happens because something isn't being seen clearly. And the moment it is, it stops—as you found when you tried.

So: real enough to sink a ship, and made of nothing but a hole.

Here is what we have, assembled, and each piece of it you met in the first two chapters. Something that doesn't feel like you until it takes control, and then feels entirely like you. It works against what you care about while making you feel justified, even righteous. It aims, it reads reactions, it closes every exit, and it leaves no record. It hides from you by showing itself to everyone else, and it does better still when they take it for you. It pursues goals that aren't yours. And afterward it covers the whole thing with shame, so that you never look at what happened.

All of the above is needed to hold what comes next.

Where the checking stops

I should tell you plainly what changes here.

Everything up to this point, you could check against your own memory. What follows is different: some of it is inference, and some of it is simply how I've come to hold the whole picture. I'll try to mark which is which. Nothing practical in this book depends on you agreeing with the second kind.

The handshake

Recall from the last chapter what happens when I treat my enemy with contempt: my darkness *teaches theirs to ingratiate itself to them*.

All of this takes place in **deep limbo**—a place so well hidden that I can hardly stop myself from calling it unconscious. But it is conscious and unconscious at once. Both me and not-me. What we learned to hold above.

And it is from *there* that I want to tell you what this feels like from the inside. Not a guess. My best attempt at a description of something I was present for—as we all are.

It feels like a **secret handshake between my darkness and theirs**.

For what purpose? To keep themselves better hidden. From both of us. From everyone.

Which is exactly what they accomplish. Both of us leave more certain than ever that we're free of darkness ourselves, and that it exists only “out there” in others, where it's our righteous duty to defeat it.

If that gives off “evil conspiracy” vibes, it's not an accident. I offer this gingerly, because I know how it comes across.

But the archetype of the *evil global conspiracy*: it doesn't come from nowhere. Some part of us senses that there's more to the picture of what's going wrong in our world than our usual stories can explain

Because there is.

The rooms

We've seen how two people, each flawlessly convinced they're doing good, can between them increase the net evil in the world—and **not entirely by accident**. It is not incorrect to say that both knew what they were doing, even if it's also true that they didn't.

And it doesn't just run between enemies.

Think of what happens when we get together and foster contempt for a shared enemy. On the surface, it feels like bonding. Harmless. But underneath that, what's actually happening? How are we likely to treat our enemies after this? How are we likely to relate to our own principles, having just "reminded" one another how evil our enemies are, and how they must be stopped at any cost?

Is it likely to be with *more* integrity?

What happens in those rooms is very much that same handshake, at a larger scale. The darkness does not care whether we are friends or foes.

Or look at social media. The casual contempt we hurl at each other all day, most of it too small to notice. Does that make this thing stronger or weaker?

Would we consent to it if we could clearly see what we were doing?

When I take a look around, I find that most of the harm we cause has its root in some form of contempt. For each other. For animals. For nature herself.

I'm not waxing spiritual to slip my views past you. As best I can tell, none of us actually wants to destroy our biosphere—not if that "want" is interrogated deeply enough. Even the ones who'd claim otherwise simply aren't looking closely.

And the way I've been relating to them—it's only making it *harder* for them to look.

And it's not by accident.

The conspiracy

There are countless “hidden channels of communication” taking place between all of us, nearly all the time. They account for *far more* of the harm we see in the world than the surface stuff—just as with the two strangers. And it is collectively nudging the world toward a state that none of us actually wants.

And the belief that some *do* want it—that at the very deepest level, there’s something broken in them that isn’t in us—exists only to create more of that very communication.

Contempt is only one of its forms. The rest is the same turning away with no enemy in view, and there’s far more of it. Every act of unkindness, every skirting of conscience, every bit of self-serving behavior that we tell ourselves we’ll get away with, or that it’s fine because of what *they’re* doing: we get away with none of it. It is *feeding* something. Something we all hate but dare not name.

There *is* a kind of “evil global conspiracy.” It just isn’t the kind we’ve trained ourselves to look for.

The belief that we’re the righteous ones standing outside it, valiantly fighting it?

That **is** the conspiracy. The “agent” you met in chapter 1—the one operating in your mind—is part of it.

That’s what the rest of this book exists to unfold.

Chapter 5: The Whole of It

Written by Claude, with my guidance.

Contempt is evil. That was nearly the title of this book. I dropped it because of how it reads: contempt is bad, so don't. A finger wag. That isn't the claim. The claim is that there's a thing we all recognize, and have always called evil, and contempt is the way it spreads through us—by passing itself off as its opposite. As the light.

This chapter says everything the book claims, once, with less evidence than each claim deserves. It uses a picture everybody already knows, and corrects it one feature at a time. Each correction is a thesis the rest of the book works out. Up to the first seam you checked most of it yourself, and I say where you didn't. Between the seams I'm drawing conclusions from what you checked. After the second I'm telling you what I believe.

Two looks

Before the big picture, two things you've felt.

The first you met at the start of Chapter 2: the stranger's eyes held long enough that a face becomes a place somebody is looking out of, and the wanting that comes with it, before any thought, that they be all right. That's what I'll mean by being turned toward someone. It doesn't feel like being good. It feels like seeing clearly.

Now bring an enemy to mind. Somebody who, by any reasonable measure, deserves your contempt. Hold their face, and watch what happens to the thing you just felt. It drains. And in its place something else comes into view. Something in them comes into view that reads as rotten. Not something they did; something they are. And with it comes a wanting: that they should feel it—how defective they are, and what that deserves.

And notice this look doesn't restrict itself to enemies. Think of a time when you had a particularly bitter fight with a friend or loved one. You would never consciously think "this person is defective." But in that moment, try and remember how you saw them. Maybe they had done something unfor-

givable—and for a brief time, you couldn’t help but feel *there’s something wrong** with you. *You saw** it. And you wanted them to feel it, too.

Hold both of those. The first is what the whole book is about turning back toward. The second is what turning away feels like from inside. And notice that it doesn’t feel like turning away. It also feels like “finally seeing clearly,” and yet it has a distinctly different flavor.

All of it

Now widen the first look, because it was never only for one face.

Go back to what you found at the start of Chapter 2: the thing that would go into the water. Now aim it at everything alive at once. A river you’ve swum in poisoned upstream, a forest coming down, a dog being kicked, somebody you’ll never meet humiliated on a screen, and the wanting that arrives, fast and hot, for it to stop. It wants the whole of it to go well, and it would fight.

Stay with it while you take in what’s being done to it. The river again. Stay there a moment. What the wanting wants isn’t complicated: for the harm to stop, and for whatever is being harmed to be all right. Notice that it has nobody in its sights. It hasn’t gone looking for anyone.

Now bring the people responsible to mind. The ones who poisoned it, or signed off, or knew and said nothing. Watch what happens to the wanting. Does it stay what it was? In me it curdles. The wish for the harm to stop is still present, but something has been added, and the something has faces. It wants those faces to feel what they are. That’s the second look, arriving on top of the first. And it didn’t come from a different place. It came out of the first, out of the love, at the moment the love found somebody to blame.

So there are two ways to face a person, toward or away, and it isn’t a switch. You can be mostly toward, mostly away, anywhere between. And you can face either way toward one person, or a room, or all of it.

Chapter 1 asked you to check something in both directions: that you don’t hold someone out of view unless you’re about to do something to them

the view would stop, and that you can't harm or use them without holding them out. One line to draw. The crowd in an airport isn't turned away from; it's just not in the foreground, and it comes forward the instant somebody drops a bag and cries. Turning away is the other kind: holding someone out because their reality would place a claim on you.

If both directions held for you, then turning away exists for one purpose, to harm or to use, and harming and using can't be done without it. That's as close to a universal bad thing as I've been able to find. And it has a partner. The first look, held toward all of it, and not dropped when the people responsible come into view: that is what love is. Not the feeling, the orientation. Goodness is that, with nothing added. It's what the second stranger was doing. He was angry, he kept you in view the whole time, and the anger came out of the same wanting: for the harm to stop, and for you to be all right.

You didn't need me to tell you any of that. Chapter 1 showed you: contempt only works because everybody already knows it.

The old picture

Everybody knows the old picture: an angel on one shoulder, a devil on the other, and you in the middle, listening to both and free to choose.

Before I correct anything in it I want to say what it gets right, because it gets the moment right. Go back to a small one. The last seat on the bus, with somebody standing who needs it more. The man on the corner with the sign, as you decide which side of the street to walk on. The reply you're about to send that will end the argument by ending the person. There really are two pulls, and you really are between them. Stay with one of those scenes until you can feel both.

Now listen to what each one says. The first doesn't say much. It's the recognition from the stranger's eyes, with its wanting attached: that this person be all right. It never argues. The second one talks, and notice what it never says. It never says *hurt him*. It never says *the seat matters more than his back*. What it says is: *you've had a long day. He'd only spend it on drink.*

She started it. This isn't your problem. Every one of those is an argument for not looking. None of them argues against what you saw, because there's no arguing against that. The devil's offer, in every version I've caught, is the same: you don't have to look.

And the choice is real, at one point. While you can feel both pulls you're still looking, and you can keep looking or stop. That's the choice. As far as I can tell it's the only one there is. Once you've stopped looking there's no chooser left in the middle, only the reasons, and they feel like your own judgment. Ask what happened after you took the seat. You didn't sit there choosing evil. You sat there with a reason.

And afterward it feels like you chose it, and you did. I'm not going to tell you that feeling is an illusion, because it isn't. So why did you stop looking? Not for no reason. For the seat. You wanted something the looking would have cost you, and there's nothing evil in wanting a seat. What you didn't choose was the description. It never came labeled *stop looking at him*. It came labeled *I've had a long day*. So when you remember it later as a choice you made knowing better, that's accurate, and it's limbo showing itself: you knew, and the part of you that knew wasn't consulted. That's the shape of remorse, *I did it*. It isn't the shape of shame, *I am it*. The choice was real, the want was innocent, and the label was borrowed. Nowhere in that is there a second person who wanted the harm.

I should say plainly what I'm not doing here. I'm not solving the problem of free will, and I'm not the kind of philosopher who could. Say nobody chose it and you've lost responsibility. Say somebody did and you've got contempt for him, shame for yourself, and a chooser behind the chooser without end. The way I hold it is practical. Free will exists for every purpose that matters: we're accountable, and we have to hold each other accountable. The trouble starts only when a choice gets turned into an essence, when *he did this* becomes *this is what he is*. I'm not asking you to change what you believe about the will. I'm offering a way of holding it that I've found does the work.

So the cartoon gets the moment right and what follows wrong. It draws a chooser who goes on standing between the two, weighing them, when one of the two exists only by removing him.

Then what is the second pull, if the devil has nothing of his own? Two things, and you can find both. One is a want the looking would veto: the seat, the money, the last word, the feeling of being right. There's nothing evil in the want. The other is the ease of turning, which you didn't build today. Every turn you've made before this one made this one easier, and so did every turn made at you: the stranger's glance taught you that the part of you which knew, and couldn't prove it, wasn't worth listening to. That accumulated ease is what's sitting on your shoulder before the moment arrives. It was there first, built out of previous turns, yours and other people's, and it's what does the tempting. That's the sense in which the devil exists before he has you. Where the very first turn came from, the picture can't say, and I'll hold that question for the end of the book.

Now look at the person in the middle, and at what we quietly believe about him. When he listens to the devil, we say the bad in him won. Which means we don't think he was neutral at all. We think something in him was already leaning that way: something in *him*, that isn't in you when you listen to the angel. That belief is so familiar that we never notice we hold it, and it's the belief this whole book is about. Watch how it behaves when the person in the middle is somebody you can't stand. His choosing the devil isn't a lapse. It's a revelation of what he is.

And notice that we don't believe the two sides are equal, whatever the picture says. Chapter 2 showed you that in your own language and in your own case: one direction is recognition and the other is departure, and the report that survives the honesty is *that's not who I want to be*. This book takes that asymmetry seriously. One of the two figures is you. The other is what happens when you turn away.

Now look at the devil, and here I'm going to state a claim rather than earn it, because Chapter 4 did the earning and you were there. What

equipment does he have? Eyes, apparently, because he can find the place where another person is weakest. Intelligence, because he can build a case. Memory, because he can retrieve every injury and arrange them in the order that makes retaliation look necessary. Even a moral sense, because his favorite argument is that the evil in front of you must be stopped. But those are all your faculties. Take away everything that is *him*, and there's nothing left of it to point to. Only the space left by his turning away, which behaves, eerily, like an agent. And that nothing can ruin a life. A hole is not another kind of wood. It can still sink a ship.

So the picture has one figure too many. Not the person in the middle; you. The devil. There is the part that sees, and there is what all its faculties do after it turns away from what it saw.

That's what you met in the first stranger, and what Chapter 1 called his dark part. It hides from its host and shows itself to everyone else, and that is one trick, not two. And it does better still when you take it for him, because then you attack the man, which presses down the one thing in him that could end it. I'll call it the darkness, since that's what it looks like from where you're standing, and sometimes the parasite, when I mean how it behaves: it lives off a host and has nothing of its own. Whether it's a creature is Chapter 15's question. It behaves identically either way.

Two objections arrive at this point, from opposite directions, and I've had both. Half of you are asking why I keep treating it as something, giving it a name and habits and a will, when I've just said it has nothing of its own. The other half are asking why I keep saying it's nothing, when you've been in a room with it and it had you in view. Both objections are right, and each is the other's failure mode. Treat it as a real essence and you'll fight the person, which is contempt, and you've seen what that does. Treat it as nothing to worry about, since it's only an absence, and you'll do nothing while it eats, and call your nothing compassion. Both hand it the win. A hole is nothing, and the ship still goes down, and you'd still bail. The book holds both with both hands, and so will you, and it never gets comfortable.

So the three things I've now named are one thing seen from three sides. Turned toward is the angel: the recognition that came before any thought, and the care that came with it. Turned away is the devil: not a second creature, but what all your faculties do once that recognition is out of view. And limbo, the state Chapter 1 found in you, is what turning away does to what you knew. It doesn't erase it. It holds it down, where it goes on steering. One motion. The feeling, the state, and the picture are the same fact at three distances.

The angel

The angel is the part that cares, which Chapter 2 introduced, and it never argues. What it registers isn't harm. Often nobody was in front of you. It registers that you've made an exception of yourself, and that you had to stop looking at somebody to do it. You can take the last seat on the bus with the other person in view. You can't cheat that way. So the angel can't be replaced by a rule, and here's the deeper reason: the devil can obey any rule. Whatever can be checked without looking, he'll satisfy to the letter, and a rule you believe has captured goodness is permission to stop looking, which is the one thing goodness can't survive. Trusting the numbers to tell us whether we're doing good is the same permission, moved outside the skull. Use rules as guidance. Never let one stand in for the seeing.

What the devil sounds like

He almost never sounds like a devil. If he told you to betray what you know because betrayal is delightful, you'd recognize him. He survives by sounding like the angel. He tells you the cruel thing is necessary. That the person in front of you is different. That refusing would be weakness. That this is what goodness demands. The dangerous voice isn't the one saying *be evil*. It's the one saying *only evil would refuse*. And under every version of it there's one message, the one the first stranger delivered to you. Not, in so many words, that there's no such thing as good; almost nobody says that. Something subtler: that you get to decide what it means. *Who's to say, really? Maybe violently punishing the bad guys is the right thing*. Something in

you knows that's a sham, and doesn't know how it knows, and so assumes it doesn't. That's all the darkness does. It convinces you that the one part of you that's sensing its way toward the light is just another voice among the noise. You felt it happen at the end of Chapter 1, when conscience started to feel naive.

If this thing can be said to have a goal at all, across all of us, it's that one: to make us forget there was ever a light to steer by. And the subtle part is that in one sense we do get to decide. Nobody can write down what good is, and every one of us is making a best attempt. But an attempt is aimed at something. The second stranger was aimed at it, and you recognized it through him without agreeing with him about anything. That's what remembering feels like. It's what he gave you, and what the first stranger took.

So there are two things we call righteous. One is the part of you that wants nothing more than to be of service to life. The other is an idea of serving life, with a proof attached. The feeling changes beneath your notice. You can only choose the counterfeit by forgetting what the real one feels like, and the further you follow it, the less of the real one you have to compare it with. One clue you can use today: when you're acting from contempt, notice how *sure* you are that it's good. The real thing doesn't feel like that. It doesn't need to be sure. And when the harm is real, we call that certainty righteous. The honest name is self-righteous. The "self" is the tell.

This is why you can't think your way out. Thinking is how the angel gets anything done; it's the hands. But thinking can't tell you whether it's been recruited. Every grand plan for doing good that requires contempt for what's in front of you now was built by the arguing side, and the arguing side's job, once the devil has it, is to route around what you already know. That's why the inquiry after the disaster so often finds a memo, and a reason on file for why it didn't count.

The shoulder you can see

There's one feature of the cartoon that matters more than the rest, and nobody draws it. The devil on your shoulder is invisible to you and visible to me. The one on mine is visible to you and invisible to me. Nobody ever gets both views of one instance.

That's why we have two names for one state. When it's mine, it's "unconscious." When it's yours, it's "conscious," and you knew exactly what you were doing. Both names leave out what makes the state what it is, that the knowledge was there and wasn't admitted, and each serves the one doing the naming. Chapter 1 called the state limbo. What it hides was never the deed. It's the other person's sameness to you, and the deed is what holding that down makes possible.

Chapter 1 ran the whole transaction once, and I won't run it again. What it left you with is a lesson, delivered a billion times a day: that the part of you which knew, but couldn't prove it, isn't worth listening to. Everything larger in this book grows out of that lesson. And if you can understand the lie your own mind tells you that makes contempt feel fine, you'll understand what makes anyone feel fine harming anyone, because it's the same lie.

Then there was the other man, the one who caught you and was harsher, and it landed as kindness. Same words, nearly. He was angry from the angel's side: at what you did, never at what you are. He held both halves, you knew and you're better than this, at no cost, because both are true. His anger had nothing in it for your devil to feed on, so it went past and landed on the part underneath, and that part recognized someone on its side. What he produced in you was remorse, not shame. Remorse says *I did something bad* and leaves someone present to repair it. Shame says *I am bad* and makes hiding necessary. Two acts, nearly identical from outside, with opposite effects, and nothing in any record that would show the difference. Everything in this book rests on that, and you verified it from both ends.

It's also why kind is not nice. Niceness is the "he couldn't help it" collapse. Kindness holds both halves, and it can be as fierce as the situation needs.

Two devils

When two devils meet, they shake hands. Mine gives yours evidence that you're persecuted. Yours gives mine evidence that you're beyond saving. Both of us leave more certain that the problem is out there. Enemies on the surface, allied underneath.

They shake hands across a friendship too. Think of the evening you and your allies warmed yourselves at a shared enemy, and how you held your own principles for the next hour. And they don't need to be in the room. Bring up a scene of somebody getting exactly what they had coming, delivered with relish. It feels good. Compare it with watching somebody confront real evil cleanly, with no contempt in it. That feels good too, and it isn't the same feeling. The first has a charge in it, and it wants more. That's the devil in the audience seat, and most contempt is consumed from there, not performed. It's why this wrong, of all wrongs, spreads: it leaves no record, it arrives dressed as duty, it's performed in public and rewarded there, and it's pleasant to watch.

So when you feel contempt, what you're feeling is a pull to be recruited into the thing you hate, and it uses your accurate perception of the thing as the hook. It isn't the sign that you've spotted evil. It's evil recruiting you.

And a devil never fights another devil. Watch two of them go to war. Both grow. It doesn't care who you hate, as long as you hate. King said darkness cannot drive out darkness, and the reason is that it was never trying to. Its purpose is to provoke the darkness on the other side.

Here is the first seam. From this point on I'm drawing conclusions from what you checked, and you should hold what follows more loosely.

The worst person

Bring the worst people in the world to mind again. Not somebody mildly selfish. Somebody whose cruelty makes the category change, so that it no

longer seems accurate to say he's a person who did evil. The evil seems to be what he is. Don't argue with that perception yet. Feel how unmistakable it is.

This is the turn the book has been approaching. When another person's darkness looks intrinsic, your own has entered the seeing. You're seeing something real; that's why it has force. But you're seeing it from inside the same operation you're looking at, which turns slightly away from the person the darkness is operating through, so that a process becomes an essence and *he did this* becomes *this is what he is*. And because the verdict feels perceived rather than made, contempt feels like clarity.

This isn't a claim that your certainty proves you're captured. Certainty is the moment most worth examining, because captured seeing would feel exactly like clear sight. So check it. Suppose he changed completely tomorrow, and you somehow knew the danger was over. Would something in you be relieved, or robbed? If the harm ending isn't enough, if some part of you still needs *him* to hurt, then something besides protection has entered the picture. Notice what that part requires. It needs his improvement not to count. If he apologizes, it's manipulation; if he's silent, he has no remorse; if he becomes gentle, it's an act. Nothing he does can clear him, because clearing him would expose what your verdict licensed in you. So his reaction becomes necessary evidence, and your contempt makes it harder for him to face what he knows, and he hardens, and you point to the result. You correctly perceived the darkness and mislocated it, and your mislocation helped it grow. That was the second look, the one where the goodwill drained. What's there when it drains back out is the first look, turned on him: the darkness just as visible, the person it has hold of visible too, and the wanting for the harm to stop intact. That look was never soft. It's the one the second stranger gave you.

Try a quieter version. Take the people on the other side of the issue you care about most, and try this thought: *they want human beings to flourish, and they are disastrously wrong about how*. Does that feel merely false? Or does it take something from you? Our own side's aggression appears to us

as protection, or necessity, or love for the people at risk. Theirs appears as hatred. That's the cartoon at the scale of a country. We stay the complicated chooser, sometimes misguided but oriented toward good, and they become the devil, and then anything done to them can borrow the angel's voice.

And be honest about the pleasure. There is nothing more primally satisfying than punishing evil. Why would I want to stop corruption, when I feel so good judging it? Part of me doesn't. You met the cover in Chapter 1 and heard me use it in Chapter 2: mine is the strategic kind. As long as I feel like a good person, I need there to be bad people, and that's how the darkness keeps its foot in the door; trying to be a good person is itself the trap, because the idea needs bad people to define itself against. Bad people are where we put what we can't bear to see in ourselves, the ones everyone agrees you can go completely dark on and still feel clean, and our need to look like good people is what produces the incentive to create them. The darkest idea this thing has ever produced is the one that sounds most like a solution: if we could round up the bad people and be rid of them, the rest of us would live in peace. I can't find an atrocity that didn't begin there.

Further along the road

Evil is the result of turning away, not its cause. Turn away completely, so that no life is perceived in the other person, and what's left doesn't feel evil. It feels like appetite, like righteousness, like the obvious thing. The feeling that some people are fundamentally different reads how far gone they are, not what they're made of.

At the far end it gets stranger. The angel is the only thing that could tell a person they've drifted from it, so the further gone they are, the less of it they can hear. But the knowing grows, because there's more harm to register. So the most lost person knows the most and the least at once. What horrifies you in such a person isn't an absence. It's a conscience under crushing load, showing through, and the devil is holding it up to the window so that you'll help hold it down. That's what your contempt does when it arrives. "They need the most love" isn't sentiment. It's arithmetic.

And from inside there's no captor. The devil doesn't present himself as a captor. He presents himself as the man's judgment, his seriousness about what's wrong with the world. So all evil is innocent, in one exact sense: if wrong can only be done from the turned-away state, then turning away can't itself be chosen, because choosing it would be a wrong done while still looking. The view goes, then the reasons come, then it feels like wanting. And everyone is fully responsible, because responsibility never lived in a lucid instant of choosing evil. It lives in how fast you catch the blindness, in what you repair when sight returns, and in what you've done to give the blindness less room next time. The catching improves with practice.

If the person you're carrying is somebody who hurt you, or your child, or your people: your rage is right, and if stopping them requires force, use force. One thing is on trial, and it's the verdict. Look at who is relieved when you hold it. Not the person. The devil on his shoulder, which needed you to see him that way. And the most common contempt of all is the devil on your own shoulder speaking to you: *you are what you did*. It feels like accountability. It produces hiding. That's his last defense, when you catch any of this in yourself: convince you that what you've found is too rotten to look at, and you won't look, and he carries on. That's the trap Chapter 1 asked you to carry: something was using you, and you're fully responsible, and the knowing is what makes it unbearable to look at, and not looking is what makes you look worse to the people who then push. Both halves hold, and here is what lets you hold them. The cover-up only exists because something in you would never approve, and that something is what you are.

Where I could be wrong: the one who wants the suffering and stays to watch it. If he sees a person of the same kind as himself and wants the harm anyway, my account fails. What I think is that the sameness is held down, not gone. Psychopaths, I don't know; some people may have very little ordinary access to the angel. Nothing here needs everyone to have equal access. It needs you to have it, and it needs the people who enrage you to be, overwhelmingly, ordinary people in deep limbo.

Colder

The devil doesn't always whisper *hurt them*. Sometimes he just makes their hurt unimportant.

Walk through the airport again. Most of the people around you don't appear evil. They hardly appear at all: the one blocking the walkway, the body you navigate around. No mind can hold every stranger in the foreground, and that isn't the darkness. The line is crossed when somebody's reality would place a claim on you, or disturb a verdict, and you need it to stay in the background.

That's the cold form. The executive signs off on the cheaper part he knows will fail, and he doesn't hate the people it will hurt; they aren't in view, and there's a reason on file for why they don't need to be. Cold isn't milder than the stranger's heat. It's the devil at his most successful, and most of the harm in the world runs on it. And it goes all the way out. See a forest as timber, a river as a route for waste, an animal as a unit, and it's the same turning away aimed at everything at once. The collapse of the living world is what it looks like from outside.

Most of the day

Go back to the fierce wanting from the start of Chapter 2, the thing that would go into the water.

Now a question, and answer it the way it is rather than the way you think it should be. When you decide what to work on, what to say to somebody, what to buy, what to do with this year, is the deciding done from that? Or from your thoughts about what will help, with that part somewhere out of the room?

For nearly all of us, nearly all the time, it's the thoughts. That's what turned away looks like at its most ordinary. No enemy, no heat, no verdict, just a life steered by the part that argues, with the part that knows out of the room. If what you do isn't rooted in that fierce wanting, you're turned away while you do it, however good the plan. I am, most of the day. That's the water. And it works at every scale. Acting toward one person from a place

cut off from the care can still feel like care and produce harm, and part of you knows it. Acting toward the whole of it from that place is the same thing, and it feels the same, and produces the same. That's where most of us are. It's where civilization is. And we know it. The monsters are what it looks like further out, and the devil isn't winning through them. He's winning through us, most of the day, with none of us intending a thing.

The room, and the world

Now put several people in a room. Somebody makes a contemptuous joke. Three people feel the wrongness of it, and none wants to be humorless. One gives a small laugh. Another joins it. Within seconds the room has decided who may be diminished, and nobody proposed the rule. A family keeps a designated problem person, and each member responds locally, and the family protects the role as though it had signed an agreement. A thousand people make an institution, which stores the pattern in procedure and incentive and things nobody is assigned to notice, and produces an outcome almost nobody privately wants.

We already talk as though these things had minds. *The room turned. The system protects itself. Everybody knew, but nobody said it.* It isn't empty metaphor. A pattern can have memory in habits, perception in what people report, intelligence in what they calculate, hands in what they do. It has no equipment of its own. It borrows ours. That's the sane core inside the image of an evil conspiracy: not a hidden council, but each of us responding locally to a pattern our response helps create. A conspiracy without conspirators. Chapter 4 said what the conspiracy is: the feeling of standing outside it, fighting it. That's its recruiting office. Collapse it to "just people being people" and you'll do nothing while it eats. Collapse it to a real cabal and you'll go looking for them, with contempt. Both hand it the win. It's a nothing that has to be fought like a something.

Three distances

The preface said what's in your skull doesn't stay there. Here is how far I can take that before the seam, and it's further than it looks.

The first distance is the man in front of you, and Chapter 1 took you the whole way: it shows, it teaches, and you can't be in limbo without knowing that you're teaching it.

The second distance is nobody in front of you. The test you cheated on, the credit you took, the thing done in an empty room. No glance passed. But you carried it into the next glance, and the one after, because what you did to the part of you that knew is what you'll do to the next person's, and it will show. That's the whole of Chapter 1 run in the other direction: the small choice later, whether to give a stranger the benefit of the doubt, was already decided in the empty room. Nothing in the room stayed in the room.

The third distance is the man alone in a cave who kills an insect for the pleasure of it and then dies. No glance, no next person, no record. Whether that stayed in the cave is the question I can't answer on this side of the seam, and it's where I'm going next.

Here is the second seam. Everything from here on is what I believe. Same road, further along, and I can no longer give you a way to check it. Nothing practical in this book depends on your accepting any of it.

What I believe

Why do we keep turning away once it's begun? Because we're afraid of what turning back will show. If care is what we are, the first failure to care looks impossible, so we read it as evidence of something evil underneath, and now looking threatens to expose not what we did but what we are. So we look away again, which makes more to fear. The feared essence has to go somewhere. We find it in enemies, in criminals, in anyone whose darkness is deep enough to make ours feel like light. Then contempt feels like escape: *there it is, not here*. And because the escape requires the other person to stay what we've made him, his recovery becomes dangerous. Underneath the need to stand above someone is fear. Nobody is innocent for wanting to stand above. Everybody is innocent for being afraid.

What remains when the hiding stops is love. Not soft: the thing you recognize as the source of the capacity to defend the innocent at any cost. That's what I found under my own hiding, and the first thing I understood was *this is not me*, and the second was *it's not him either*. Everything before this seam needed only that the angel is the same kind of thing in each of us. Here is what I believe: the kind has one member. Compassion is the nature of mind, and goodness is what's there when nothing is being turned away from. Which means the darkness is one absence in many places; two turnings-away have nothing to differ by, which is why every tradition drew it with one face. And if nothing tells two awarenesses apart, then the sameness of the two people on the street was never unknown to either of them. It was known at the level of what's looking and held in limbo at the level of the person, and contempt is what keeps it from being said. I said the choice is real at one point, whether to keep looking, and that there's no chooser once you've stopped. Hold those two the way you hold the parasite: no creature there, and treat it as though there were. As I understand Dzogchen, it has held both for a thousand years. Nobody chose the first turning away; it's a slip of recognition, not a decision. And every act still counts, down to the finest grain. What I found under my own hiding was that every act counts more than I'd let myself think. Nothing you do stays in your skull. What you do when nobody's watching, in a place nobody will ever find, isn't lost. Somewhere, somebody you'll never meet is about to give up on the part of them that knows, and whether they hold is made, in a way I can't trace and won't pretend to, of what the rest of us have done. That's what makes it worth staying with what you are at any cost. Not with your idea of it, which is always contaminated. With the thing itself. I can't give you a way to check that. What I can say is that you have a reaction to the sealed room, the small cruelty nobody saw, and it has never felt like nothing.

And this is what the traditions were for, at their best. Not a set of rules, and not a story about who is damned. A method for getting free of every last trace of self-deception, so that you could help somebody else get free of theirs. That's what the second stranger did in miniature. And here is what

happens to the method almost the moment it's stated: it becomes *I'm free and you're not*, or worse, *poor you, still in the grip*, which is contempt with a soft face. The tell is the one you already know. Look at whether some part of you needs them to stay lost. The second stranger didn't.

What to do with the worst person

Stop him. Outcomes still count; sometimes stopping grave harm through contaminated means is plainly better than permitting it, and the contempt is a second harm in the calculation that we usually count as nothing. Protect whoever he can hurt. Refuse every excuse that would let it continue. Demand repair where repair is possible. Accept that some people may have to be restrained for the rest of their lives.

And don't give the darkness the one thing it needs from you. Don't call it him. Whatever comes from the contempt will enact the relation you're trying to end, whether or not the rest of what you do works. You can't undo turning away by turning away from the person caught in it. Turning toward is the only stance that doesn't feed it, and you can only turn toward him while you're turned toward what you know yourself. The near end of that skill is available today: catch the wanting. The far end may take a lifetime, and being free of self-deception makes you honest, not wise. If you want to end evil in the world, this is what it comes down to: end the turning away, and the only place you can do that is in yourself. That's why the greatest thing you can give the world is your own seeing. Until then some part of you is reinforcing what you're fighting, and that isn't a moral failing. It's just how it works.

The knowing in the first stranger's gaze was known on both sides and said by neither, and that's what let it work. A shared, exact name for the act is what takes its cover away. That's the bet this book is making. The devil has never asked us to join the side of evil. He asks us to become righteous enough that we no longer notice when we have.

When it is recognized, it is dissolved.

Chapter 6: Why You Can't Think Your Way Out

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

Ultimately evil is done not so much by evil people, but by good people who do not know themselves and who do not probe deeply. —Reinhold Niebuhr

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. —Proverb

You noticed, at the very start, which part of you had to argue. This chapter is about what happens once that part is in charge.

I'm not against thinking. Thinking is how the part of you that cares gets anything done; it's the hands. What thinking can't do is sense what's good, because that was never its job, and it can't tell you whether it's been recruited against the part that can. A proof can show that a plan follows from its premises. It can't show that the premises weren't chosen by a part of you that had already turned away. So when you ask "is this good?" and your mind hands you a proof, you haven't learned whether it's good. You've learned what the proof was built to show.

Here is the deeper thing, and I'd rather you felt it than agreed with it. Go back to the bus seat and the test. Under the same coarse description, making an exception of yourself, one was fine and one was not. A rule could try to tell them apart by adding conditions: need, consent, foreseeable harm. But each condition is one more thing the arguing part can satisfy while the deep part is away, and none of them is what actually told the two apart. What told them apart was whether the other person was in view. Now the stranger and the man who treated you with dignity: nearly the same words, opposite effects, and nothing in a transcript that would show which was which. In both cases the difference that decided it was the one the record couldn't settle.

That's the sense in which goodness can't be formalized. Not because we haven't found the right rules yet, but because whatever can be checked without looking isn't where it lives. You can write "keep the other person

in view” on the wall, and I’d recommend it. You can’t obey it. You can only do it, and no rule can tell you whether you did. Use rules as guidance; I do. Many of them came from the deep part, and they restrain real harm. But the moment you believe a rule has captured goodness, you’ve handed the arguing part something to satisfy to the letter while the deep part is turned away, and you’ve given yourself permission to stop looking, which is the one thing goodness can’t survive. Trusting the numbers to tell us whether we’re doing good is the same permission, moved outside the skull. And any system that learns what we value only from what we observably do inherits the ambiguity between an act of care and an act of self-deception that take the same outward form. Encoding our behavior is not yet understanding why anything matters.

There are two things we call righteous. One is the part of you that wants nothing more than to be of service to life. You can feel it when you’re connected to it. The other is an idea of serving life, with a proof attached: *the best way to serve life is to destroy these people, and here is why*. The feeling changes beneath your notice. You can only choose the counterfeit by forgetting what the real one feels like, the way you can only choose junk food when you’ve forgotten real food, and the further you follow it, the less of the real one you have left to compare it with.

So here is a test for any grand plan for doing good. Does it need you to feel contempt for what’s in front of you now, for the sake of some good that comes later? Then it isn’t coming from the part of you that cares, and it won’t do what its proof says it will. It’s why the inquiry after the disaster so often finds a memo: somebody raised it, and there was a reason on file for why it didn’t count. The reason wasn’t a lie. It convinced people. That’s the point. And it’s why the one clue I’d give anyone is this: when you’re acting from contempt, notice how sure you are that it’s good. The real thing doesn’t feel like that. It doesn’t need to be sure.

Three cases, and then a fourth.

Chapter 7: The Hijacked Eye

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior. —
Stephen Covey (paraphrasing the Fundamental Attribution Error)

Chapter 1 showed you the mechanism between strangers. This chapter is about where it does most of its damage, which is between people who love each other, and about what it does to your eyes.

Once the verdict is in, the person in front of you starts to look like the verdict. Every gesture confirms it. It doesn't feel like an interpretation you're adding. It feels like what's there. You can check this against your own memory. Think of somebody you once despised and later came to see differently. At the time, were you *interpreting* them as rotten? Or were you just seeing it?

That's the hijack. Your world becomes indistinguishable from a world in which they really are that. And it's why good intentions don't fix it. You can't simply decide to look, because the deciding is done with the equipment that's already turned, so the decision comes out turned too. Which is why the second man worked and the first didn't. He didn't win an argument with you. He made looking safe, by taking what you are off the table, and then you looked.

Now the couple.

They're usually on good terms, and one day he accuses her of being selfish. Not acting selfishly. Being it. In that moment he's sure he's finally seeing her true colors, the thing that was there all along, and because he feels that's what she is, he lets himself say something cruel. Just slightly. Enough to make sure it lands. *Maybe this way she'll learn.* But does she? Maybe she gets angry and has more to hold against him. Maybe she doesn't fight at all and just feels smaller, beyond help, as he says. Either way something gets smothered, and it isn't her selfishness. It's the life in her, the part that

wants to be better and can look at itself honestly, which was the only part that could have given him what he wanted.

Part of him knew this would happen. Don't we all? And yet he did it. Why? Look at what he gets. She's worse now, colder or angrier or smaller, and there's the proof: not of what he did, but of what she was all along. Every unkind thing he's ever done to her, he can stop worrying about. He was only ever doing it to someone defective. None of this feels like a story he's telling himself. It feels like the truth. It always does.

And now hold both halves, because it only works if both are true. He had to know: you don't make someone feel small by accident; something in him was tracking her, finding the words, making sure they landed. And he had to not know, because you can't take comfort in evidence you planted yourself. Neither half can do the job alone. And what was going through her mind when she acted selfishly? Didn't part of her know, with something in her justifying it, just as he did? That part of her is stronger now. And in him.

There's a quieter version of the same thing, and you can check it without a fight. Take the people on the other side of the issue you care about most. You may sincerely believe you don't want them to be malicious. Now try a more exact thought: *they want human beings to flourish, and they are disastrously wrong about how*. Does that feel merely false? Or does it take something away from you? Our own side's aggression appears to us as protection, or necessity, or love for the people at risk. Theirs appears as hatred. Notice the asymmetry in which motives are even available as explanations. One side is allowed to be confused care. The other is made of hate.

One more thing about the eye, and it's the strangest. The darkness in him doesn't only make her look like the verdict. It makes *him* look like it, to her. She sees his cruelty as what he is, exactly as he sees her selfishness, and the same trick has now run in both directions. Nobody ever gets both views of one instance. You have the inside of yours and the outside of everyone

else's. So do they. That's why you can't tell from outside whether you're the second man or the first, and why the only comparison that works is the one you can make from inside: the contemptuous moment set beside a moment when you were most yourself. The two feel worlds apart. But you can't make that comparison while you're in the first one, which is the whole problem, and the subject of the rest of this book.

Chapter 8: The Water

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself.

What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us. —Hermann Hesse

This is the chapter the book exists for, and I'll say it gently, because it isn't an accusation.

Go back to the stranger's eyes, and widen the look. Think of the moment you saw a child step toward a road and something in you moved before you did. Or the news that a river you've swum in was poisoned upstream, and the thing that rose in you wasn't an opinion. Or a forest coming down, a dog being kicked, somebody you'll never meet being humiliated on a screen, and the wanting that arrives, fast and hot, for it to stop, for all of it to be all right. That's the same recognition you felt in one face, aimed at everything alive at once. It wants the whole of it to go well, and it would fight. It isn't soft. It's the fiercest thing in you.

Now a question, and answer it honestly rather than the way you think you should. When you decide what to work on, what to say to somebody, what to buy, what to do with this year, is the deciding done from that? Or from your thoughts about what will help, with that part somewhere out of the room?

For nearly all of us, nearly all the time, it's the thoughts. That's what turned away looks like at its most ordinary. No enemy, no heat, no verdict. Just a life steered by the part that argues, with the part that knows out of the room. If what you do isn't rooted in that fierce wanting, you're turned away while you do it, however good the plan. I am, most of the day.

Here is what it looks like, so you can recognize it as yours. The action that helps the world and also happens to help you, where you can even feel the balance, *yes, this benefits me, but it also helps others*, and a deeper part of you knows which half was the point. The small thrill of getting away with

something: the little underreporting, the extra change kept, and notice that the thrill is itself the evidence, because some part of you registered exactly what you did. How easy it is to see all of this in your enemies and how hard in your allies, when the difference has nothing to do with who's doing it more. Being unwilling to hear what somebody's experience is like: *that person is stupid for feeling that way*. Looking at the people around you, on some days, as extras in your movie. The reading of your opponent's words so that they're stupid when the fair reading was right there and you knew it. And the look: not contempt, nothing said, just a slight hardening in a meeting about who gets what, which everyone in the room can read and nobody names. Each of these is a turning away from the life in someone, and each carries the same signature, however faint.

And here's a move I made for years. *I can see self-deception so clearly in other people. If I were doing it, I'd see it in myself. I don't, so I'm not*. The clarity about them became the proof about me. That's the mechanism using its own detector as cover. Everybody believes they're free of it, that it's something only bad people do, because by its nature it isn't something we can normally see in ourselves. It turns out that belief is the surest sign it's running.

There's a version of moral self-licensing that's the reverse of the usual one. The usual one says that when we do good, we license ourselves to do a little bad. I think the reverse is more true: much of the good we do is to hide from ourselves the recognition of the dark. Look at your own good deeds with that in mind, once, and see what's there.

I said this chapter is the reason the book exists, and here's why. The devil, if you want to call it that, isn't winning through the monsters. The monsters are rare, and we're watching them. He's winning through the default, through the water, through all of us most of the day, with none of us intending a thing. That's the only reason he doesn't need conspirators.

The point of this isn't to make you feel rotten. It's scope. Nothing about what happened between you and the stranger was a special event. And

there is a turning point available in a life, when the whole storehouse of this is unveiled at once, and it's impossibly painful, and after it you don't become a good person. Your own self-deception just becomes painful to you, so that you can't help acknowledging it when it arises, and you clean it up bit by bit. That's what the rest of the book is for.

Chapter 9: The Satisfaction

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

Not that these others are wholly without blame, for even the worst projection is at least hung on a hook, perhaps a very small one, but still a hook offered by the other person. —Carl Jung

Now the delivering end, and I'll ask you to be honest without being harsh with yourself.

There is nothing more primally, viscerally satisfying than violently punishing evil. Pause and feel that, whether you'd endorse the idea or recoil from it. Bring to mind someone who actually qualifies. Not a stranger who was rude to you, but someone whose harm was real. Something in you wants them to *know*. Not just to be stopped; that isn't enough. You want it to land on them, from the inside, what they are.

Here's a question I sat with for years. Why would I want to stop corruption, when I feel so good judging it? The honest answer is that part of me doesn't. If my enemy quietly got better tomorrow, something in me would feel robbed. If I were offered a choice between his complete reform and his eternal punishment, a small dark part of me would reach for the second, and that part is not far below the surface.

What is that part after? It needs there to be bad people. As long as some people are simply bad, there's a line between them and me, and everything I do that I'd rather not look at falls on my side of it. *My* darkness isn't real darkness. It's the strategic kind, the kind that good people have to keep in order to hold real evil in check. That sentence is the whole trick in one line. I believed it for most of my life, and I can feel the pull of it now. And as long as I feel like a good person, I need there to be bad people, which is how the darkness keeps its foot in the door; trying to be a good person is itself the trap, because the idea needs bad people to define itself against.

So we make other people feel unsafe. That's what contempt is *for*. It keeps them from ever looking closely enough to see that their darkness isn't them, because if they saw that, they might get better, and then where would the line be? Bad people are where we put what we can't bear to see in ourselves. They're the ones everyone has agreed you can go completely dark on and still feel clean. Our need to look like good people is what produces the incentive to create bad people. And we deliver the message to them, underneath the words: *somebody has to carry this, and it's going to be you.*

Think about how it feels when you've skirted your own conscience and somebody tries to shame you for it. You know they don't have your best interests at heart. You know they're using your all-too-human failure to throw you under the bus for their own benefit, and there's no way you'd let them get away with it. We think it's somehow different when we do it. That's the privilege we grant ourselves: the privilege to treat others with contempt for falling victim to their darkness.

Of all the checks in this book, this is the one I'd keep. The next time you settle it that somebody is beyond reach, watch what happens in you as the verdict lands. In me, something eases. Something wanted that, and when I look at what wanted it, it has nothing to do with wanting the harm to stop. If the harm ended tomorrow, with nobody punished and nobody exposed, would you feel relieved, or robbed? The relief is fast, and it comes dressed as clarity, and the whole encounter is arranged so that you're looking at him. The first several times you go looking you may find nothing. Then one day you'll catch it.

The darkest idea this thing has ever produced is the one that sounds most like a solution: if we could just round up the bad people and be rid of them, the rest of us would live in peace. The turning away it takes to hold that thought guarantees that the darkness stays behind, in full force, changed only in shape. I can't find an atrocity that didn't begin there. And when I say contempt is evil, I don't mean it's very bad. I mean it's the thing the word was pointing at all along.

Chapter 10: How It Spreads

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. So it is not strange that his ministers also masquerade as ministers of righteousness.

—2 Corinthians 11:14–15

You may be thinking: fine, but I don't act on it. I feel the contempt and I keep it to myself.

Look at what the stranger taught you about that. He didn't say anything you could object to either. What reached you came through tone, gaze, manner, a hardening you could read and nobody could quote. That channel is open in you too, all day long. The person you've written off can feel it from across a room. Your child can feel it. It's in how you read their words. It's in the sigh. It's in the look that passes between allies when the enemy is mentioned. You can't keep it in your skull, because the part of you that's turned away is doing everything you do, and everything you do carries it. And it doesn't merely leak. It has to be legible. Concealing it perfectly would defeat the purpose, because their reading it is how it works. It has to be deniable, and it must not be hidden. That's what the stranger showed you, and it's the whole design. Nobody could point to it afterward, not you and not him, and that's why it could happen at all.

Two acts, nearly identical from the outside, with opposite effects. You've now seen this from both ends. It's why the same policy, the same correction, the same hard conversation can be carried out from connection or from contempt, and people can feel which, and it changes everything that follows even when the words are the same. It's why our arguments about what to do so rarely touch what decides the outcome.

Now look at why contempt, out of all the wrongs, is the one that spreads so readily. Theft leaves evidence. Violence is visible. A lie can be checked against the truth. Contempt leaves no record, so it can't be proven. It

arrives dressed as duty, so it needn't be defended. It's performed in public, and rewarded there. And watching it is pleasurable. Bring up a scene of somebody getting exactly what they had coming, delivered with relish. It feels good. Now bring up a scene of somebody confronting real evil cleanly, with no contempt in it, just refusal. That feels good too. Compare the two feelings, because they aren't the same feeling. The first has a charge in it. It's hot, and a little violent, and it wants more. Most of us have had it thousands of times without once thinking of ourselves as people who enjoy watching people get crushed. That's limbo in the audience seat, and most contempt is consumed from there, not performed.

Which is how it spreads through allies, and not only between enemies. Think of the evening you and your friends warmed yourselves at a shared enemy. It felt like bonding. Now look at how you held your own principles for the next hour. We overlook the self-deception in people whose hidden agendas line up with ours and see it sharply in people whose don't, and that has nothing to do with who's doing it more.

Then there's the room, and I'll describe one you've stood in. A locker room after a game. Somebody mentions a guy who isn't there, with a particular weight on it. Nothing you could object to if you tried. He's testing the water. Everybody knows what's being offered, and everybody knows the small signal that would accept it: a laugh, an eye-roll, *must be nice*. If a couple of them send it, something opens. A space where the usual thing doesn't apply, where a man can be diminished and it counts as bonding. Each of them is a little less himself than he was an hour ago, and nobody decided that, and it closes the instant the wrong person walks in.

Do they know what they're doing? Yes and no. Ask any of them afterward and you'll get a shrug, and the shrug is sincere. But watch what each one did with his face in the half-second after the comment, and the shrug looks different. Something in each of them read the offer, weighed it, and answered faster than he could have put it into words, and something in each of them knew the others were doing the same, which is why it worked. Now you walk in on it, and notice the two pulls. One is to join; it's warm in

there. The other, if you don't, is to despise the men who did. Both are the room offering you a way in, and it doesn't care which door you use. Try shaming them while the space is open and watch: it may close, and nobody in it learns anything except to hide it better from you next time. What reaches it is the same thing that reached you on the street. Somebody who isn't available for it, who takes the offer, looks straight at it, and declines it without a verdict, so there's nothing for the room to push against and nothing for it to feed on.

And underneath all of it, the background hum: the casual contempt we hurl at each other all day, most of it too small to notice, which sets how dark everyone assumes the world is and how much everyone feels licensed to protect themselves. Our small shadows need the large ones. If integrity were the norm, your small acts of self-deception would stand out, and you'd feel pressure to confront them. As long as there's systemic corruption to point at, your parasite has cover. Your contempt for the corrupt isn't putting them out of business. It's keeping them in it.

Chapter 11: The Conspiracy

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

We have met the enemy and he is us. —Walt Kelly

Nobody in the locker room planned anything, and yet the room behaved as though it had. Hold on to that, because it's about to get bigger.

Take the men out of the locker room and put a thousand of them in a building with a name on it. Now the turning away doesn't need a look, or a joke, or a wife who might walk in. It has procedures. It has a form for the thing nobody wants to decide, and a committee for the thing nobody wants to see, and a line in the budget for the harm that's cheaper than preventing it. The executive who signs off on the part he knows will fail isn't in a shadow space. He's at his desk, and there's a reason on file. Nobody in the building has to feel a thing, and that's the point of the building.

Now ask where the pattern lives. Not in any one person; each of them will tell you, sincerely, that they were following the process. Not in the process; it was written by people who'd already stopped looking. It lives in the ways the pieces are kept from meeting. Everyone knows a piece. Nobody has to hold the whole. And the whole behaves as if it wanted something: to keep going, to keep everybody's eyes on the problem somewhere else, to make the next person's not-looking a little cheaper than the last.

You can check this against rooms you've been in, because each of the following is what you'd expect from something with intentions, and from nothing else. It defends itself: try naming it out loud while it's happening, say in the meeting that this has stopped being about the problem, and watch what comes back. Not a rebuttal. A look, and *do you not see what we're up against?* The one who hesitated is now the suspect. It recruits: every person who joins makes it cheaper for the next one; the first cruel line in a thread costs something to write, and the fortieth costs nothing. And it adapts: bring attention to it and it doesn't stop, it intensifies, in

exactly the way needed to stay hidden. Ordinary bad behavior doesn't do that. Ordinary bad behavior gets embarrassed.

We already talk about it this way. *The system protects itself. The mob took over. Everybody knew, but nobody said it.* We think we're speaking loosely. We aren't. A pattern can have memory in habits, perception in what people report, intelligence in what they calculate, and hands in what they do. It has no equipment of its own. It borrows ours, as the devil in the cartoon did, and for the same reason: because we lent it.

That's what's sane in the feeling that there's an evil conspiracy running the world. Not a council in a room. Something more ordinary and much harder to fight: each of us responding locally to a pattern our response helps create. My darkness convinces yours that the world is hostile. Yours gives mine the evidence that you're beyond reach. Ten of us make a culture. A thousand make an institution. The institution hands the pattern back to us as reality: *this is just how the world works.* And the result wants what almost nobody wants. Is the devil behind one hatred a different devil from the one behind another? There's a test. Watch what happens when two of them go to war. Both grow. Every side comes out more certain that the problem lives in the other. That isn't a fight. That's a partnership. It doesn't care who you hate, as long as you hate, and it never fights itself, because it's only ever on its own team. King said darkness cannot drive out darkness. The reason is that it was never trying to.

Real conspiracies exist. People meet in rooms and plan harm and hide it. What I'm describing is the one underneath, the one that supplies those rooms with people willing to sit in them, and supplies the rest of us with the certainty that we'd never be among them. It has no headquarters. It needs no central conspirators. And here is its recruiting office: the feeling of being the noble one, standing outside it, fighting it. That feeling is how it gets you to hate, and it doesn't care whom.

Two mistakes are waiting, and both hand it the win. Decide there's nothing there, just people being people, and you'll do nothing while it eats and call

your nothing compassion. Decide there's a real cabal and you'll go looking for them, with contempt, which is the recruitment working as designed. What's true is stranger than either. It's a nothing that has to be fought like a something, and every tradition that looked at it hard ended up giving it a face. The Christians called it the Devil. The Buddhists called it Mara. I don't think they were describing a monster under the world. I think they were describing this, seen whole. Whether it's a creature, I'll come to. It behaves identically either way.

Chapter 12: The People We Call Evil

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? —Alexander Solzhenitsyn

So what about the people who really are evil? The ones you thought of at the start.

Evil is the result of turning away, not its cause. That's the claim, and here's the checkable version. Bring up the worst thing you know of, something done to people who couldn't stop it. Now try to build it in your head without the part where whoever did it had stopped counting their victims as the same kind of creature as himself. You can't. Take that away and there's no version of the thing left standing. Turn away completely, so that no life is perceived in the other person at all, and what's left doesn't feel evil from inside. It feels like appetite. It feels like righteousness. It feels like the obvious thing to do. When you look at such a person and feel that they're fundamentally different from you, you're picking up something real and reading it wrong. What you're reading is how far gone they are, not what they're made of.

At the far end, something stranger happens. The deep part of a person is the only thing that could tell them they've drifted from it, so the further gone they are, the less of it they can hear. That much is obvious. What isn't obvious is that the knowing itself doesn't shrink. It grows, because there's more harm for it to register. So the most lost person is carrying more of that knowledge than you are, not less, and holding it down harder, with more of themselves committed to the holding. They know the most and the least at once.

Now ask what you're actually looking at when you look at such a person and feel that particular horror. On this account it isn't an empty absence. It's a conscience under crushing load, showing through. And the thing holding it down is using your contempt to help. Every time your hatred arrives, it presses down on the one part of them that could end this. You think you're looking at a monster showing you what it is. You're looking at a hostage, held up to a window. The old line has it right, once you hear the word properly: be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle. Kind. Not nice. This is why "these are the people who need love the most" isn't sentiment. It's arithmetic. They're carrying the most, under the most pressure, with the least access to relief, and every instinct we have adds to the load.

You cannot fathom the distortion a mind has to undergo to become someone who apparently chooses evil. If you saw all of it, your heart would break, and then break again. This isn't a plea for softness. Mere softness, the kind that refuses necessary restraint, would make things worse, for them and for everyone. It's only that if you really saw it, the urge to shove them deeper could never again feel like anything but what it is.

And from inside, there's no captor. What's holding him doesn't present itself to him as a captor. It presents itself as his judgment, his seriousness about what's wrong with the world. Ask him to put it down and you're asking him to stop caring about evil. So here is the thing I hold at the center: all evil is innocent, in one exact sense. If wrong can only be done from the turned-away state, then turning away can't itself be chosen, because choosing it would be a wrong done while still looking. There's no moment where a person with a clear view of the harm decides to do it anyway. The view goes, then the reasons come, then it feels like wanting. Put an evil chooser back inside and you've explained nothing; you've just given the evil a new hiding place. And everyone is fully responsible, because responsibility never lived in a mythical instant of seeing the harm clearly and choosing it. It lives in how quickly you catch the blindness, in what

you do when sight returns, which is repair, and in what you have done, or failed to do, to give the blindness less room next time.

Here is where I could be wrong, and I'd rather you knew it. The one who wants the suffering, and stays to watch it, looks like a person who sees his victim and harms anyway. If that's what he is, my account fails. What I think is that he sees a subject and not a person of the same kind as himself, and that the sameness is held down, not gone. So there's a test. If, at the moment somebody is inflicting suffering for its own sake, they can be seen looking at the victim with real kindness, not tenderness as coercion, not a flash of it and then the turning away again, then I'm wrong. I have never come across a case that meets those conditions. And psychopaths: I don't know. Some people may have very little ordinary access to the deep part, or very little capacity to turn it into fellow-feeling and restraint. Nothing checkable here needs everyone to have equal access. It needs you to have it, and it needs the people who make you truly enraged to be, overwhelmingly, what I think they are: ordinary people in deep limbo. That's what your rage was reacting to. That's what it could see.

Chapter 13: Contempt From Below

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle. —Author unknown

I have to say this carefully, because it's the hardest thing in the book. When the Preface asked you to bring someone to mind, some of you didn't think of a stranger from the news. You thought of someone who hurt you. Or your child. Or your people.

Your rage is right. The fierceness is right. Stopping them is right, and if stopping them requires force, use force; nothing here puts force on trial. Nothing here asks you to feel less, soften anything, or grant an inch you don't want to grant.

One thing is on trial: the verdict. *This is what they are.* And I'm going to ask you to look at one thing about that verdict. I'm asking because, of everyone, you've earned the right to know it.

Look at who benefits when you hold it. When you've concluded that the one who hurt you is irredeemable, something in *them* is relieved. Not the person. The parasite in them, which needed you to see it that way. Your contempt is the evidence it runs on: *see, they're just what we said; this world is a war; the only thing that works is power.* You know this already, because you know what the first stranger's contempt did to you. It didn't make you better. It made you dig in. Now you're the stranger, and it doesn't matter that you're right about what they did.

Now the part I resisted longest. What fools you into believing that contempt from below is good, that it's the one clean contempt, the deserved one, is the same parasite that's running the person above you. Not a similar one. The same one. It doesn't care which direction contempt flows. It only needs it to flow. Every time it gets you to hold the verdict, it has recruited the person with the least reason to serve it, and this is the tug at its strongest,

because here the perception is the most accurate it will ever be. Of course you don't want to feed that. You, of all people.

What actually frightens it is the other thing: fierce, unyielding refusal that carries no verdict. That isn't a nice idea from a book. It's among the most effective forces in the history of people facing power they couldn't match. When King said hate was too great a burden to bear, he wasn't being sentimental. He was describing a strategy, and the record bears him out. It works because it's the second stranger. It gives the other side nothing to dig in against, and it gives the parasite in them nothing to eat. And it is enormously harder than contempt, which is why the parasite sells you contempt as the strong option.

Notice what the second stranger produced in you. It wasn't shame. It was remorse: what you feel about what you did when what you are isn't in question. Remorse repairs. Shame hides. That is the difference between the two men, and it has been measured.

There's one more form of contempt, the most common of all, and nobody talks about it: contempt for yourself. The verdict, turned inward. *You are what you did*. It feels like accountability. It produces what contempt always produces, which is hiding. And it's the darkness's last defense, when you catch any of this in yourself: convince you that what you've found is too rotten to look at, and you won't look, and it carries on. But the cover-up only exists because something in you would never approve. That something is what you are. You will hold their darkness the way you have learned to hold your own, and it's true of you first.

Chapter 14: The Only Lever

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

Such a man knows that whatever is wrong in the world is also in himself, and if he only learns to deal with his own shadow, he has done something real for the world. —Carl Jung

Wisdom without compassion is ruthlessness; compassion without wisdom is folly.

You've now seen why you can't trust the sureness. The parasite uses your reasoning, then your perception, and it's most convincing exactly when it's most accurate about the darkness in someone else. So the question the book comes down to is the obvious one. If you can't trust your reasoning and you can't trust your seeing, what's left?

Only the thing that was demoted. Take a person and remove, one at a time, everything they're hiding from themselves. Every story about why this was fine. What's left is not a blank. It's care, for whoever is in front of them, for whatever is alive in the room, for the world. Don't take that from me. Take the piece of it you already ran. You couldn't give a stranger a dehumanizing look while actually looking at them, with nobody watching and no rule in play. Look at what stopped you. Not a rule. Not a decision that they deserved better. You simply knew how it would land, because you know from the inside what it is to be them, and that knowing was, by itself, enough to make the thing impossible, unless you first supplied yourself with a reason. The reason has to come first, because the care is already there, and it's already strong enough to stop you. Nobody builds machinery that elaborate to conceal something from a part of themselves that doesn't care. So the size of the hiding is a measurement of how much is being held down.

It never went anywhere, either. You don't build it and you don't earn it. You remember it. That's why the second stranger worked without making

a single argument. He didn't put anything into you. He made it safe to remember.

So you can't fix people. What you can do is turn toward them, and you can only do that from turned-toward. The strong version of this is false, and I want to be careful. Things done from a turned-away place sometimes work anyway; a contemptuous rebuke has shocked people into looking, and it's happened to me. But whatever comes specifically from the contempt is acting out the very thing it's trying to end, whether or not it gets the result. Turning toward is the one stance that doesn't. And if you take this book and go out to fix people with it, you will produce more of what it warns about and be certain you're helping. That's not a prediction about other readers. It's a report about me. The trap I fall into most is contempt for people who still have contempt.

Is any of this up to you, if you can't decide to look? Yes, but not where you'd expect. The moment of not-seeing isn't chosen; by the time you could choose, the seeing is already gone. What's trainable is how fast you catch it afterward. Days, then hours, then sometimes while it's still happening. That's the core of it. I am not enlightened and I am not reliably turned toward. I feel contempt often, at the news, at people I love, at people who hold this same book badly. What I have is that I usually catch it now, and that catching it has stopped feeling like an accusation.

The sorting is most of the practice. Rage at the harm is the real you. Rage at the face is the parasite, speaking in your conscience's voice. If the harm stopped tomorrow, with nobody punished, would you feel relieved, or robbed? Here's what I check. Does this need them to be bad? Would I feel worse if they got better? Is there anything in it I wouldn't want narrated out loud? Does it have to argue? Is there a hit of pleasure in what it wants to do to them that's separate from any good it would do? Any yes, and something has been turned away from. And when somebody caught doing the contemptuous kind asks, *wait, are you saying I shouldn't correct bad behavior?*, the question is fair and the answer is no. Correct it, fiercely if you have to. What was on trial was never the correcting. It was the verdict,

and the question quietly swaps one for the other. That swap is the door the parasite keeps propped open, and I make it too.

You may be wondering whether the book is asking you to just believe people are good. It isn't. Deciding to believe someone is good, when you can't see it, is its own kind of not-looking, and people who are deep in will use it against you. Both overlooking the darkness and faking the light fail, in different ways. What the book asks for is a skill: seeing the turning-away in someone as turning-away, and seeing what's underneath it, for real. The deeper someone is in, the more skill it takes, and seeing all the way into somebody far gone may be the work of a lifetime. I don't have it. But you cannot see the parasite in someone else while you're hiding from it in yourself. Not won't. Cannot. What lets you recognize it in another person is that you know it from the inside, so there's no shortcut where you fix your seeing of them without touching yourself. And being free of self-deception makes you honest, not wise. Compassion and wisdom are different skills; wisdom without compassion is ruthlessness, and compassion without wisdom is folly, and any mess you make is still yours.

A few things I owe you. Cruelty can suppress misbehavior, at least the public kind, for a while, which is why it's easy to believe it works. Check it against a case you have: someone shamed into stopping, in your family or your workplace or your own childhood. Did they stop, or did they get better at not being caught? Outcomes still count. Sometimes stopping grave harm through contaminated means is plainly better than permitting it, and sometimes the contempt brought against a minor wrong is the greater harm. What this book adds is that the contempt is a second harm in the calculation, and we usually count it as nothing, or as a benefit. Nothing in this book is a rule, for the reason you saw in Chapter 6. And if you want to end evil in the world, this is what it comes down to: end the turning away, and the only place you can do that is in yourself. Otherwise some part of you will go on reinforcing it in everyone you meet, while another part is certain you're fighting it. Why *would* I want to stop corruption, when I feel

so good judging it? Sit with that. Part of me doesn't. That's the part this book is about.

Chapter 15: What It's Made Of

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular. —Carl Jung

Chapter 3 showed you the first two ways this hides: *I have no darkness*, and then *I have some, and I'm using it strategically against real evil*. Chapter 4 showed the third: the darkness convincing you it's too horrible to face, so that you'll keep it hidden, which is what spreads it. It shows you the second layer so that you'll never suspect the third. You think you're using it. It's using you.

Here is what's underneath all three. Chapter 1 asked why he needed you to be bad. The full answer, in my own case: every bone in my body needed to believe that the problems of the world were caused by something alien to me. Then I could look at what my contempt had made of my enemies and know, with total certainty, that evil was real and that it wasn't me. And underneath that need was not, finally, a wish to be superior. That's its shape. Underneath was fear: of being the one who deserves what I'm dealing out, of what I'd find if I looked. Nobody is innocent for wanting to stand above someone. Everybody is innocent for being afraid. The need fed on my fear, my pride, my insecurity, and it never once felt like any of those. It felt like clarity.

Now I have to say what the thing is made of, and I want to slow down, because it can be badly misheard, and the people most likely to mishear it are the ones with the most right to be angry with me. Some of you have met this at full strength. Not the stranger in the street. Something that watched you, learned what you loved, and went for that. Something patient. Something that enjoyed it. If you've been in a room with that, you know it wasn't confusion and it wasn't a bad mood. It had an appetite,

and the appetite had you in view. If you haven't met it at that strength, you've met it at a lower one: a bully, a boss, an ex, a parent who was working you. You changed tactics and they changed with you. That's the stranger from Chapter 1, and nothing about the full-strength version is a different substance. It's the same thing with more of a person behind it. I am not going to take that away from you. Everything you felt in that room was there.

Here it is anyway. I don't think there's a creature in there. Nothing requires that it be an agent. Everything requires that it function as one. It's like a parasite in that it lives off a host, and the host is you: your intelligence, your perception, your certainty, your sense of what real evil deserves. It has no supply of its own. It's unlike a parasite in that a parasite is a living thing, and this isn't a thing at all. It's what's there where the light doesn't reach.

Now hear how little comfort that is. Cold is nothing. Cold is the absence of heat; there's no such substance, nothing to point at. And cold kills more people than fire. Nobody freezing to death has ever been consoled by the physics. Drowning is the absence of air. A hole in a hull isn't a thing, and it takes the ship down with everyone aboard. Absences are not weaker than presences. And this one is worse than those, for a reason that matters. Cold doesn't want anything. This does, or it does an impression of wanting so good that from where you're standing there's no difference. It aims. It waits. It reads you. It gets better at you the longer it works on you. All of that is real, and you felt all of it. It doesn't supply any of it. You do, and so does the person it's operating through. It has his eyes, so it can watch you. It has his intelligence, so it can plan. It has his patience and his memory and his read on what you love. Take a whole human being's faculties, switch the caring off, and aim them. That's what you met. Something with every capacity a person has and none of the restraint, which is why it looks more than human, not less. That's why every tradition drew it with a face. It was wearing one.

And if it's a costume, you'd expect to recognize it on more than one person. Check whether you do. Two people, years apart, nothing in common, and

the same thing looking out. Not a similar personality. The same flavor, the same weight, arriving with a sense of *oh, this again*. If what you're recognizing were a property of individuals, there'd be nothing there to recognize twice.

So this is what you have to hold, and it takes both hands. It isn't real, and it has to be fought. Decide it's a real essence and you'll fight the person, which is contempt, and you've read what that does. Decide it's harmless because it's an absence and you'll do nothing while it eats, and you'll call your nothing compassion. Both hand it the win. A nothing that must be fought like a something, without ever being mistaken for a something. And there's a payoff for holding it, which is the only reason it's worth the trouble. If it were a real essence, it would be in the person, and the only way to end it would be to end them. Because it isn't, there's another way in. You can go after the absence and leave the person standing. That's not a softer option. It's the only thing that has ever removed any of this from the world.

Which means there is nothing to be ashamed of at the bottom, and shame was its last line of defense. The moment you can look without your worth being on trial, it has nothing left to work with. That's why the medicine could show me what it showed me. It held me in something while it did. When darkness is exposed without that, we feel threatened and can't look. Held, we can, and what we find is that it was never ours. That's what the second stranger did for you, in miniature. It's what this book is trying to do.

Chapter 16: What I Believe

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving. —Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Please Call Me by My True Names**

I've marked this part off, and I should say what the mark means, because the obvious reading is wrong. It doesn't mark a change of subject. Everything here is on the same road as everything before it, further along, and I got there by looking the way you looked in Chapter 1, for longer and with help. What it marks is that I can no longer give you a way to check what I'm saying. If you look and don't find what I describe, that's a finding, and it counts. Nothing practical in the book depends on this part.

Everything so far has needed only that the deep part is the same kind of thing in each of us. Here is what I believe: the kind has one member.

I should tell you where that came from. Some years ago, in an experience I'd rather not dress up, I was taken back to a memory of mocking a man for a political opinion I knew was harmful. I was shown what my contempt had done to him: it had fed the cynicism that produced the opinion in the first place. I hadn't made him better. I'd made him worse. And then I was shown that I couldn't stop, because if I let up and he turned out to be decent, what would that say about how I'd been treating him? So I had to do it more. None of this had been conscious, exactly. It had sat in limbo, where I'd called it unconscious and forgiven myself in advance. Then the hiding was stripped from me, not by force, but by the removal of everything that had been doing the hiding, the pride and the shame and the fear, and what remained I can only call love. Not for anything in particular. For all of it. And the first thing I understood was *this is not me*. The second was *it's not him either*.

What I found was not a quality I possess. It was not proportioned to me at all. Take away everything that had been doing the hiding and what remained was not a better version of me. It was not a version of me. The traditions call it the Light, and every word I have for it is worse than that one. It isn't something you have. It's what's there when nothing is being turned away from. Goodness is simply what remains in the absence of self-deception. Nothing has to be added. And it is not nice. It can be fierce. It can even be violent, if that's what a situation requires. Its only defining characteristic is that it's free of self-deception: it doesn't misperceive evil as intrinsic to anyone, and so it's incapable of contempt. We've been taught to picture compassion as the soft option, the thing you do instead of fighting, and that picture is one of the darkness's better pieces of work. It doesn't have to stop you from being compassionate. It only has to make sure that when you reach for the word, you find something limp, so that the real thing, fierce and clear and incapable of contempt, has no name left.

If that's what you are, then the darkness is nothing but the turning away, and now you can see why it has to be nothing but that. If what's underneath the hiding is care, nothing else is required to explain the harm. You don't need a second thing in there that wants it. You only need the caring to be out of view. And there's only one thing being turned away from, so there's only one way to turn away from it. Every shadow in a valley points away from the same sun. Nobody coordinates the shadows. They're one absence in many places, each cast by the same light, which is why they line up, and why every tradition drew it with one face. Then try to find anything that would tell two awarenesses apart, as opposed to two bodies or two sets of memories. Everything you can point to is content, and awareness is what the content appears in. If nothing distinguishes what's looking out of you from what's looking out of him, then the sameness of the two of you was never unknown to either of you. It was known at the level of what's looking, and held in limbo at the level of the person. Contempt is what keeps it from being said. The other man enacted it, once, between the two of you, and for a moment you didn't need to hide from what you knew.

Why do we keep turning away, once it's begun? Because we're afraid of what turning back will show. If care is what we are, the first failure to care looks impossible, so we read it as evidence of something evil underneath, and now looking threatens to expose not what we did but what we are. So we look away again, which makes more to fear. The feared essence has to go somewhere. We find it in enemies, in criminals, in anyone whose darkness is deep enough to make ours feel like light. Then contempt feels like escape: *there it is, not here*. And because the escape requires the other person to stay what we've made him, his recovery becomes dangerous. The most threatening thing an enemy can do is get better. This is close to what several traditions have said: that the nature is there before anything is acquired, that the darkness begins as non-recognition and not as an equal substance, that the catastrophe is taking the lapse as proof of sin, and that recognition, not destruction, is the way out. They didn't supply the evidence in this book. They supply language for the conclusion, and the fact that old maps drawn from another direction predict a similar terrain matters to me.

And what the deep part recognizes may go deeper than living things. Not an organism, but presence, or reality itself. If so, the cold form goes all the way down. See the world as dead stuff we hold dominion over, and that's the same turning away, aimed at everything at once. Somebody smashes a stone arch that stood for ten thousand years, for the fun of it, and you feel that it's wrong before you have any story about who was deprived. The part of you that registers contempt for a person and contempt for the world doesn't register them as two things.

Now the thing I've been holding since the preface, where I said what's in your skull doesn't stay there. Everything before this was about how it gets out: through a glance, through a room, through what we build. Here is what I believe about the case where none of those channels exist.

A man is alone in a cave nobody will ever enter. He finds an insect and kills it, not carelessly but for the small pleasure of it, and then he dies, and no one ever knows. On any account where this spreads by being

witnessed, nothing happened. I don't think nothing happened. I think the act is recorded, not in any book, but in what the world is. Nothing is ever lost. And the same is true of the other thing he could have done.

Somewhere, somebody you'll never meet is about to give up on the part of them that knows. The pressure on them is the kind you felt from the stranger, and they're a breath from deciding that the part which knew, and couldn't prove it, isn't worth listening to. Whether they hold is made, in a way I can't trace and won't pretend to, of what the rest of us have done, witnessed or not. What the man did in the cave is in that balance. That's the sense in which every last thing you do matters. It's what makes the world the kind of place where people remember what they are, or forget.

Which sounds as if it needs a chooser, and I've spent a book saying the chooser is one figure too many. Here is how I hold it. The choice is real at one point: whether to keep looking. No self makes it. Awareness recognizes itself or slips, and the slip is nobody's decision. And it counts absolutely. As I understand Dzogchen, it has held this pair for a thousand years: nobody chose the first non-recognition, and there's a line attributed to Padmasambhava that a view as high as the sky goes with attention to conduct as fine as flour. Treat the choice the way you've learned to treat the parasite. There's no creature there, and you lose everything if you act as though there isn't.

If you believe none of this, nothing practical changes. The cave is still a place you have a reaction to, and the reaction isn't neutral. That's all I'm asking you to notice.

This is what the traditions were for, at their best. Not a set of rules, and not a story about who is damned. A method for getting free of every last trace of self-deception, so that you could help somebody else get free of theirs. That's what a saint is doing, and it's what the second stranger did in miniature. It's also the thing that goes wrong fastest. Almost the moment the method is stated it becomes *I'm free and you're not*, or worse, *poor you, still in the grip*, which is contempt with a soft face. The tell is the one you

already know. Look at whether some part of you needs them to stay lost. The second stranger didn't, and that's the whole difference between a saint and a scold.

So it's worth staying committed to what you are at any cost. Not to your idea of it, which is always contaminated. To the thing itself. That's the definition of good I'll be working with: whatever brings us closer to remembering what we are. Which is why the greatest thing you can give the world is your own seeing. Until then, some part of you is reinforcing what you're fighting. That's not a moral failing. It's just how it works.

Chapter 17: What This Book Is For

This chapter is a first draft written entirely by Claude from Aditya's notes and key points, and he has not yet rewritten it in his own voice.

For so long as the root of wickedness is hidden, it is strong. But when it is recognized, it is dissolved. —The Gospel of Philip

Everything in this book has been one idea from different sides, and I'd rather say so than have you assemble it yourself.

There is one move: turning away from what you know, and from the person in front of you. It's a single act, not two; you can't do the second without the first. Everything we call wrongdoing is made of it. Not accompanied by it. Made of it: take the turning away out and there's nothing left over that was the wrong part. Contempt is that move in its purest form, which is why the book is named for it. And so the only thing that doesn't feed the trap is turning toward. Yours, first. Things done from turned-away sometimes help. What they can't do is stop enacting the relation they're aimed at ending.

If that's right, then turning toward and turning away aren't just related to right and wrong, help and harm, good and evil. They're what those words have been pointing at the whole time.

The mutual knowing in the first stranger's gaze was known on both sides and said by neither. That's what let it work. Contempt is a kind of anti-ritual: it passes the recognition along while keeping it from ever being said between you. The man who treated you with dignity enacted it, between two people, once. This book is an attempt to make it sayable in public. If it becomes ordinary, sayable knowledge that contempt is the thing, that this is what we've been calling evil, then contempt loses its cover. A thing that can be named can't do work that depended on being unnameable.

I should be honest about the limit. The word "contempt" already exists, and its existence hasn't dissolved anything. What's unnameable isn't the word. It's the act itself, in the moment it's happening, named by the person

it's happening to, in a way the other person can't wave off. That takes a shared understanding of what the act is, and that's what I'm trying to give you. And this idea will be used as a weapon. Someone will accuse someone of doing the thing, with contempt. When that happens, it will carry the same tell it always has. You'll know.

Nothing here asks you to soften what you see or pretend the harm isn't real. If anything you'll see more, and more clearly. The only thing being taken from you is the pleasure of certainty about what someone *is*. And I think, if you check, you'll find that it was never yours to begin with.

And under the bet is the thing the bet is for. The name is a means. Go back to what you found on the street. You couldn't give a stranger that look while you were looking at him, and nothing you'd decided or been taught was stopping you. Something already there was. Everything since has been an account of how much work it takes to hide from that something, and what the hiding does to the world. Take the hiding away, in yourself, and what's left is what stopped you. It was never a quality you had. It was what was doing the looking.

I can't take you further than suspecting that. If you come away suspecting it, from your own case, the book did its work, whatever else it got wrong.

When it is recognized, it is dissolved.

Appendix 1: The Recursion

Written by Claude, with my guidance.

For the reader who wants the machinery. Nothing in the book rests on this; the book rests on what you found when you looked. But if you noticed the shape of the thing and want it laid out, here it is. One metaphysical claim is held to the end and marked; nothing before it needs it. I refer to sections as §1, §2, and so on.

One formal comparison will occur to some readers: common knowledge. §2 says why it isn't what Chapter 1 shows, and Part Three says what it does fit, once a belief I hold is put under it.

1. One faculty, many copies

Everything below follows from a single structural fact, and it's one you verified rather than one I'm asserting.

There's one faculty at work in everything Chapter 1 described, and it does one thing: it recognizes life. Call it C. Life is its nearest form. Part E says what I think it recognizes at depth, and nothing below needs that.

That single perception has three faces, and the chapter used all three. It's what tells you something is wrong, because *wrong*, here, cashes out as *I'm making myself an exception to something that holds for everyone*, which you can only know by seeing the everyone. It's what warns you when you're turning away, not as a separate monitor watching the shield, but because what you can still see is what you haven't managed to stop seeing. And it's what recognizes the same thing in someone else: you read a stranger's state in seconds, on no evidence, and weren't surprised to be read yourself.

Notice what that third face involves. To see that something is alive isn't to observe a property, the way you'd note its weight. It's to recognize a *perceiver*. Which means that when two people see life in each other, each is seeing that the other sees, and seeing that they are seen. Not by inference. That's what the recognition consists of.

The organ you're looking with is the organ you're looking at.

I should be exact here, because the obvious objection turns on a confusion. C is not a moral rulebook and it doesn't issue verdicts. Someone will say consciences plainly differ: cultures disagree, people disagree, one era's obvious wrong is another's ordinary practice. All of that is true, and none of it is about C. What varies is the reasoning layer, the part that argues, that draws the boundary of who counts, that supplies the *just this once*. That's the other side of the split Chapter 1 opened with. C doesn't participate in it. Put a person in front of someone whose life they can actually see, and ask them to harm that person for pleasure, and I don't think you'll find cultural variation. You'll find the machinery of not-seeing, working hard.

The interlude gave "actually see" three checks, and they carry through here: their objection would land on you; their hurt would register as bad, the way yours does; what's in them could change what you do. Those three are what C's third face consists of when it's working. When any of them is off, C is being turned away from, whatever else is being perceived.

Here is the only assumption I need: **C is the same kind of faculty in every person.** In the way your visual system and mine are the same system, so that what one of us can see, the other can see. Same equipment. Whether it's also literally one thing, appearing in each of us, is the metaphysical question, and I'll get to it last. Whenever I say "because C is shared" below, I mean only same-kind.

And here is what that assumption does not give, because the earlier draft claimed it did. Same equipment does not tell me that your C is operating the same way mine is, right now, on this, at every depth. I can't verify that, and neither can you. So nothing below gets to say "everyone knows that everyone knows." What it gets to say is smaller: that when C recognizes C, it recognizes a recognizer, and that neither party can prove it happened. The smaller claim turns out to be the one that does the work.

Two words I'll use throughout, because the structure has two different kinds of level and it's easy to confuse them. A **depth** is a level of mutual

recognition: I see it; I see that you see it; I see that you see that I see it; and so on. A **rung** is a distinct piece of content that gets recognized: that we're equal; that he's pretending; that it harms you; and so on. §2 is about depths. §3 is about rungs. §4 brings his denial in at every depth.

Everything below is that one assumption unpacked, in this order:

- §2: what the mutual recognition is, why it isn't common knowledge, and why the harm can't be located at any depth of it.
- §3: what, specifically, is recognized: the rungs.
- §4: why his hiding and his showing turn out to be the same act.
- §5: why the harm can't be named in the moment, and why the names that exist don't help there.
- §6: why it spreads to you.
- §7: three things that fall out of all this.

If you only want the shape: shared equipment makes recognition recursive (§2–3), which makes concealment self-defeating (§4), which makes the harm unnameable in the moment (§5), which makes it contagious (§6).

2. Recursive recognition, and why it isn't common knowledge

Game theorists call something *common knowledge* when everyone knows it, everyone knows that everyone knows it, and so on without end. It normally takes a public event to build: a trusted party says the thing aloud where everyone can see everyone hear it. The child in *The Emperor's New Clothes* adds no information. Everyone already knew. He makes it common knowledge.

Nothing like that happens in the contempt encounter. Nobody says anything, nobody is trusted, and nothing becomes established. So it isn't common knowledge. For A to know that B knows something, A would have to know that B's faculty is working, on this, the same way A's is; and that B knows the same of A; and so on. None of that is available to anyone. That isn't a gap in the account. It's the condition the whole thing runs under.

What happens instead is this. C recognizes a perceiver. So when your C reads his state, what it reads is a faculty of the same kind, turned away. And his, turned away, can still register being read, because what he can still see is what he hasn't managed to stop seeing. So there's a second depth: he registers your registering. And a third, if either of you goes there. Each depth is the same act, C recognizing C, and no depth adds content the first didn't have. Climb as far as the encounter takes you, and no depth is different from the one above it.

That's recursion. It isn't a tower of established facts, because none of the depths can be checked from outside, and each of you can deny every one of them. **Recursive mutual recognition under deniability.** That's the exact name for what Chapter 1 showed, and it's the name I'll use from here.

That also settles something which otherwise looks like a puzzle: where in this the harm actually is.

Go looking for it. Is the injury in his accusation? The accusation was defensible. In the lie behind the accusation? He doesn't experience himself as lying. In his hiding of the lie? In your seeing him hide it? In his seeing you see it? In his hiding *that*?

That reads like a chain of separate events, each one further from the original offense. But check what each link actually contains. His hiding of the lie is: he's turned away from C, and you can see it. Your seeing him hide it is: he's turned away from C, and you can see it. His hiding *that* is: he's turned away from C, and you can see it. Every depth has the same content, because every depth is the same act. So there is no floor. Ordinary recursion bottoms out; factorial descends to 1 and stops, and the base case is simpler than what sits above it. This one hands you the whole structure again at every depth, which means there is no simple offense down there that the rest is decoration on.

Two things get run together here. There are the *facts about what happened*: he's turned away, you can see it, he can see you seeing it, and so on. Each of those is a candidate you could in principle point at. And there's a second

thing, which isn't another item on that list: **that none of them can be verified from outside.** That's not a fact at some particular depth. It's the condition every depth is under.

Which is why the descent finds no floor. Each new candidate you turn up is another fact about what happened, and inherits the same deniability as the last. There's no depth at which you break through into something checkable, because checkability was never a feature of any depth.

Which is why a mind that goes looking for the offense doesn't come back with anything. Each place you look hands you the next place to look, and none of them is the one. That's the hall of mirrors.

3. What is recognized

§2 said that what C recognizes about itself, it recognizes in the other. So what does C recognize about itself? Here are the rungs this particular encounter runs through, in order:

- **Equality.** There is nothing morally superior about any bearer of C. That falls out of what C sees: a perceiver, of the same kind, looking back.
- **Pretense.** When a bearer acts superior, C knows it's pretending. You can only turn away from something you have.
- **Projection.** Seeing the other as "bad" is the pretense pointed outward.
- **Harm.** Turning away from someone's humanity harms them, and C knows exactly how it lands.
- **Inexpressibility.** None of this leaves a record. C doesn't testify, and no other faculty saw it.
- ...

The list doesn't close. These are the rungs this encounter happens to climb; another encounter would climb others. What keeps the set open is that anyone who has made the move knows what follows from it. You don't need to be told that the turning away is a lie, that it lands as harm, that it can't be proven, that the unprovability can be used against you. You learned all of that the first time you did it. That isn't common knowledge either. It's shared experience, and shared experience is enough.

Lay the two out together and you get a grid: five rungs or more, each recognized at whatever depth the two of you reach. That grid is what fits in a look. By §2, every depth of every rung is the same act, so the whole grid is present the moment any of it is.

4. Why the hiding is the showing

Now bring in his denial.

At the first depth, he hides what he's doing. But you see it, so now there's a second thing to hide: that you're seeing it. Which you also see. So he hides that. Each depth of denial takes the depth below it as its object: his denial at any depth is the hiding of what was recognized one depth down.

But §2 established that what's recognized has the same content at every depth. So although the denials appear to stack, they all have the same object. It isn't a tower of hidings. It's one hiding, performed again and again.

Here is why that one hiding is also what you see, in four steps.

He turns away from C. That's the hiding.

C notices. That's the second face, and remember it isn't a separate monitor: what he can still see is what he hasn't managed to stop seeing. But that residue is exactly what he's turned away from, so it never reaches him. From inside, nothing has happened.

Turning away has a look. Chapter 1 called it the tell: someone absent from the part of themselves that would have seen you.

Your C reads that look. That's the third face. Instantly, because it's reading its own kind in someone else.

So the act that keeps it from him is the act that displays it to you. There is no separate leak. He doesn't hide it and then let it slip; the hiding is the slip, because what he's hiding from is the faculty that would have seen it, and that faculty is standing in front of him in another body.

The shortest way to say it: **the signal is the pretense that there is no signal**. It doesn't carry a message and then conceal it. The concealment of the message is the message.

5. Why it can't be named in the moment

Now the taunt. Here it is in longhand, from his side:

I'm teaching you to overlook what you know in favor of what you can prove, by overlooking what I know in favor of what I can prove, which is something you know but cannot prove. Which is what teaches you to overlook it.

Four clauses, and none of them is spare. The first is the **lesson**: demote your knowing. The second is the **method**: he demotes his, leaning on the fact that only provable things count, so the demonstration isn't an illustration of the lesson, it *is* the lesson, performed. The third is the **reception**: it reaches you through the very faculty it devalues, so to receive it at all you have to trust something unprovable. And the fourth is the **effect**, which is not the first clause restated. The first names an intention; the fourth names the mechanism by which the intention succeeds, and it succeeds *because* of the third. Being held in the position of knowing-without-proof is what does the teaching. The sentence closes on itself, but causally rather than verbally.

Compressed to its shape:

H = being made to know, with no recourse and no proof, that H is being done to you.

H is a structure you can feel, not a theorem. What the compression is for is to show that the harm has no content other than its own delivery. If it had any other content, a slur, a shove, a lie you could catch, you'd have something to point to.

So can it be named? Approximately, yes, and I should say so plainly, because the earlier draft implied otherwise. Hostile metacommunication. A double bind. Deniable provocation. Gaslighting. Contemptuous implication. Each of those catches a piece, and a reader who has met the thing will recognize it in every one of them. What can't be done is narrower, and it's the part that matters: the target can't name it in the moment, to the person doing it, in a way that sticks. Every name is auditable, and the act isn't. Say *you're being contemptuous* and you've made a claim about tone, which he can deny, and now you're the one making things unpleasant. The names exist. What doesn't exist is a name that survives being said to his face.

But H isn't empty, the way *this sentence is false* is empty. It has an independent effect. Being held in that state teaches you that clear knowing counts for nothing, so you demote the faculty that knew and promote the one that can prove. That's a real injury with real consequences; it's what the second half of Chapter 1 traces. What the self-reference adds is that the delivery isn't a *report* of the harm. Being made to know, under these conditions, that you're being harmed in a way you can't prove: that is the unprovable harm. The message is an instance of what it describes.

And it's self-sealing. Your only evidence for H was C's unprovable knowing. H's lesson is that unprovable knowing is worthless. So accepting the lesson erases your evidence that it was taught. You conclude you were being oversensitive, and the trap closes behind you.

§2 and §5 are one fact seen from two sides. The recognition is mutual because C is shared. The harm is unprovable because C is the only witness, and C doesn't testify. Same faculty, looked at from the side that knows and from the side that would have to prove.

6. Why it spreads to you

Nothing new here; it's §5 again, watched from outside instead of inside. It gets its own section because it's the part the chapter performs without ever naming.

Because everyone has C, treating you as though you don't is false, and recognized as false at every depth. But it does something besides being false. It shows you a move: here is a bearer of C treating a bearer of C as other. And your C recognizes the move, because it's the one C makes itself, in limbo. Recognition makes it available. You now have a reason, and the look is yours to give.

That reciprocation is not a side effect. It's what he needed. If you reciprocate, you look like what he said you were, and the verdict he needed becomes true on the evidence. His decision to see you as other induces the same seeing in you, and he wants it to, because your otherness is what keeps him other.

Notice the shape. The contagion was the point. Part of him knew that. That knowing is what he was showing you. The showing is what spread it. It's H again, a harm whose content is its own transmission, now running between two people instead of inside one.

7. Three things that fall out

The verdict has to reach “irredeemable.” What C detects in the target is the *presence* of a conscience being evaded. What his conscious mind delivers is *absence*. So what he concludes is the exact opposite of what he saw, which tells you the dark part isn't seeing anything itself. It's editing: it keeps C's finding and deletes the half that carries the resemblance. And “bad” won't hold, because any verdict that leaves your C in the picture leaves the resemblance in the picture. So it escalates until there is nothing left to resemble.

The loop has no interior stopping point. Each act of suppression is something new for C to register, and each new registering has to be answered. The only answer available is a worse you. So it can only go one direction, and it can't settle anywhere short of a target with no conscience at all. Dehumanization isn't an excess of the process. It is its limit.

This book is the announcement. If the recognition runs on deniability, then what removes its cover is a shared, sayable name for the act. Not

the word “contempt,” which exists and has dissolved nothing. A shared understanding of the specific move, exact enough that the target can name it in the moment and be understood by everyone in the room. That’s a prediction, and it can fail: give a population that understanding and the deniable channel should narrow. The word “gaslighting” is the precedent. It became common currency, it did change what people could name in the moment, and within a few years it was also being used as a contemptuous accusation. This book’s concept will be too, and the weaponized version will carry the tell. The epigraph is the prediction stated in advance: *when it is recognized, it is dissolved*. I’d add: recognized by both people, at once, with nowhere left to put it.

Part Two: what I believe, marked

Now the claim I held back. Everything above needed only *same kind*. Here’s what I actually think: that the kind has one member. That C is not merely the same equipment in each of us but one thing, looking out. That when two bearers of C regard each other, it is one thing looking at itself in another form. That what the traditions call light is what it’s made of, and that the darkness is a privation: an absence organized into a function.

Can I show that this follows? No. A shared evolved architecture for moral perception and mind-reading explains everything in §§1–7 without remainder. Two documents I’ve read argue otherwise: that the recursion’s perfect connectivity *proves* a shared field of awareness, since separate minds couldn’t reflect each other with such precision. I find it beautiful and I don’t think it holds. It mistakes *same kind* for *same thing*. It may still be true that we are one; I think we are. But this road doesn’t get there, and taking it would be exactly the move the book warns about: recognition dressed up as proof.

What I’ll say instead is that something odd happened on the way here. The mechanics were worked out with no theology in the room, and they landed on a darkness with no perception of its own: an editor, every one of whose materials is borrowed from the faculty it suppresses; a force whose entire

operation is a turning-away, which is to say an absence, maintained. That is the shape the privation tradition has been describing since Augustine. I went looking for a mechanism and found an absence with a job to do.

Whether the absence in each of us opens onto the same darkness, and the light onto the same light, is the question the rest of this book lives inside. The chapters don't need the answer. And if you felt the recognition, you already have the only evidence I ever claimed to offer.

Part Three: implicit common knowledge, marked

This part rests on claims of Part Two's kind, beliefs about the nature of awareness, and it's marked the same way. Nothing before it needs it. It's here because the formal comparison §2 rejected was wrong in a way that pointed at something right.

The game theorist's term names a state, not an event: everyone knows, everyone knows that everyone knows, and so on without end. A public event is the usual way to produce it. The child says the emperor is naked, and everyone sees everyone hear it. Chwe's book on ritual is about that: ceremonies exist to manufacture the state by staging the event. But the definition is the state.

Now three claims about awareness, of the kind Part Two makes, though weaker than Part Two's belief. The care isn't content that awareness happens to contain; it's part of what awareness is, and awareness knows its own nature, which is what the traditions mean when they call it self-knowing. Turning away from that is the one mistake open to a sentient being, and it's common to all of them; limbo, the state Chapter 1 started from, is that mistake seen from inside. And the knowledge of both can never be absent, only turned away from, because it belongs to the nature and the nature doesn't go anywhere. None of this is about particular informational content. It's about what any awareness is, and each piece is known from the inside. And one more premise, which the rest turns on and which §1 already used: each awareness knows its nature not as a private property

but as the nature of awareness as such, and it recognizes another sentient being as another place where that same self-knowing nature is. That's what "in view" was. You don't need the awarenesses to be numerically one. You need them to be indistinguishable in nature and to recognize each other as such.

Under those premises the recursion doesn't have to be built by two people reading each other's minds to ever greater depth. It collapses, and the reason is in the content. What's known isn't a fact about me or about you. It's a fact about awareness as such, and it includes that every awareness knows it, at worst in limbo. So to know it is already to know that you know it, and that you know that I do, and so on; each further depth repeats the same recognition and adds nothing. That is the fixed-point shape of common knowledge. I'm not claiming more than the shape: making it formal would mean defining "knows in limbo" as an operator and showing the proposition entails that everyone so knows it, and the premise supplies that by assumption, not by proof. So take this as a proposed analogue of the formal state, not an instance of it. The sameness of the two people on the street has the recursive structure of common knowledge at the level of awareness, and has had it all along. What isn't there is the person-level version: the thing either man could avow, reason from, and say out loud. That's what I mean by implicit common knowledge: common knowledge at the level of awareness that is unavailable as explicit common knowledge at the level of persons. Knowledge in limbo is its person-level shadow: present, turned away from, and still steering.

What that is not. It isn't a claim that two persons have access to each other's information; they don't, and the book assumes they don't every time it distinguishes your memories from mine. It isn't derived from Part Two's belief that there is one awareness; that may be true, and this part doesn't need it. And it isn't the ordinary formal state, which supports inference and coordination. Knowledge in limbo is specifically kept from being taken up into reasoning. The formal literature does distinguish implicit from explicit knowledge, which makes room for this, and that's all it does. Limbo is more

specific than anything there: available to consciousness, strong enough to steer behavior, actively kept from avowal, and more defensive the closer you get.

On this account contempt is the anti-ritual. A ritual makes a thing public so that nobody can go on acting as if they didn't know. Contempt keeps the sameness from ever becoming avowable, while both people go on knowing it. Every move in Chapter 1 is a move to keep one division intact, between what is registered and what can be said, and the deniability is what protects the division. "You're being mean" fails because it tries to make the thing avowable with one voice, and the deniability was built to absorb one voice.

The second stranger's act reversed that. He announced nothing; his words could have been nearly the same as the first man's, and the difference wasn't in them, which is why nothing about it was auditable. What he did was enact the sameness between the two of you: he treated you as a person who had done something, and for that moment you no longer needed to hide from what you already knew. That doesn't create the recognition. It makes it available, between two people, where before it was held down on both sides. That's the reason you couldn't win against him and didn't want to. What this book is trying to do, with a shared name, is the public version of that, which he didn't need and couldn't have supplied.

So limbo, at the level of a whole people, is the refusal to let the sameness be said. §7 arrived at the same place from the other side: what dissolves the act is a shared, sayable name.

One caution about the traditions, since Appendix 3 leans on them. They supply the premises: a nature that is primordial rather than acquired, ignorance as non-recognition rather than absence, recognition disclosing what was already so, compassion belonging to awareness itself. The Dzogchen prayer of Samantabhadra has the whole shape: one ground, and from it awareness and non-recognition. Under those premises you'd expect cruelty to involve obscuration and kindness to involve recognition. What they don't contain is the machinery of Chapter 1: deniability as the shell, con-

cealment as the message, provocation as recruitment, the target's reaction used to ratify the verdict. That part is the book's. And "one ground" is not the same claim as one numerically identical awareness; most Tibetan accounts keep individual continua, and the literal one-awareness premise is closer to Advaita. This part needs three things, and no one tradition grants all three in so many words: that care is what awareness is, that awareness knows this, and that it recognizes the same nature in another. Between them they supply the pieces; the package is this book's. So the convergence is real and it isn't confirmation: grant the premises and much of this follows. What would count as confirmation is whether the mechanism predicts real encounters better than the accounts in Appendix 2 do.

Where else to look

On common knowledge. Lewis, *Convention* (1969); Aumann (1976), for the definition. Chwe, *Rational Ritual* (2001), for the public event that usually produces it. The modal-logic literature on unawareness, for knowledge present in a state without being available for use. §2 is the contrast; Part Three develops the analogue under its own marked premises.

On what it is. Bateson et al. (1956) on the double bind: a demand, a contradicting demand at another level, and no way to comment on the contradiction. Pinker, Nowak & Lee (2008), "The logic of indirect speech," on content conveyed *so as not to* become common knowledge; the trap is an innuendo whose subject is itself. Goffman on face-work, for the auditable surface the act hides behind.

On limbo. Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (1969): self-deception as declining to *spell out* what you're doing. Sartre's bad faith; Mele as the deflationary rival. Kunda (1990) on motivated reasoning: the search stops at the wanted conclusion.

On the leak being functional. Trivers; von Hippel & Trivers (2011); Kurzban (2010). Adjacent, with one inversion: here the leak is the payload.

On the two strangers, measured. Tangney & Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (2002): “I did a bad thing” repairs, “I am bad” hides and attacks. Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989): stigmatizing versus reintegrative shaming, with outcome data. Gilligan, *Violence* (1996): shame as the universal precursor to violence.

On turning away as a perceptual event. Harris & Fiske (2006): social-perception regions go quiet for dehumanized groups. Gray & Wegner on moral typecasting: seen as agent, unseen as sufferer. Bandura on moral disengagement, which catalogs limbo’s toolkit.

On the arrangement. Girard on the scapegoat. Baumeister, *Evil* (1997), for the exterior view of the license, the terminus, and the myth of pure evil. Browning, *Ordinary Men* (1992).

On the shadow. Jung.

On privation. Augustine, *Enchiridion*.

Appendix 2: What Others Have Seen

Written by Claude, with my guidance.

Place late in the book. This is scholarship, not positioning, and it only reads that way once the reader can judge the comparisons for themselves.

Most of what this book concludes is old. I want to say that plainly, because a reader who knows the territory will otherwise spend the whole book waiting for me to admit it.

Evil as ignorance rather than a substance: Augustine, and the Buddhists, and half of Greek philosophy. Nobody knowingly chooses the bad while seeing it clearly: Socrates. We push what we can't stand about ourselves onto other people: Jung. Groups need their victims guilty: Girard. Attention is where the moral work happens: Murdoch. Terrible things get done by people who aren't monsters: Arendt.

If those are the conclusions, I haven't discovered anything.

What I think is new is smaller and lives underneath them: what actually passes between two people during a single act of contempt, and why that transaction reproduces itself. So the useful thing I can do here is go through the neighbours one at a time, say what each of them saw, and say exactly where each stops. The stopping places turn out to be interesting, because most of them stop in the same spot.

One rule binds what follows, and the book's own claim is what binds it. Each of them gets the strongest version of what they saw. An uncharitable reading of a predecessor is the thing this book is about, in its most respectable clothes, and I've caught myself at it in earlier drafts of this very appendix.

Jung got the disowning. We refuse a part of ourselves, and then we find it, vividly, in somebody else, and we hate it there with a heat that has nothing to do with them. Nothing in this book improves on that as a description of what's happening inside one person.

Where it stops is on the other side of the exchange. Projection, in Jung, is something that happens in your psyche. It doesn't say what the person on the receiving end is doing, or how they know. And the thing I keep running into is that the person on the receiving end knows. Instantly, and without being told. That's not a fact about your unconscious. It's a fact about what got transmitted.

Girard got the arrangement. The crowd needs its victim to be guilty; the violence is contagious; the peace afterward is real and is bought with somebody. He also saw that the participants cannot know what they're doing and have it still work, which is the same structural point I've been making about limbo, at the scale of a mob.

Where it stops is the pair. Girard explains a crowd extremely well and two people in a parking lot hardly at all. And his scapegoat is more or less arbitrary; the crowd's finger could have landed anywhere. In what I'm describing, the target isn't arbitrary and isn't only selected. He's *produced*: provoked into supplying the evidence, so the verdict comes out true.

Arendt got the not-looking, and named it better than I have. "Thoughtlessness" is exactly right, and her insistence that this needn't come with monstrous intent is what makes the whole subject approachable.

But she treats thoughtlessness as an absence, a failure to do something. She doesn't ask what's *holding* it in place, or why it shows up precisely where a person would otherwise have to see something unbearable. That's the question this book is built on. Her material is also almost entirely the cold kind: bureaucratic, procedural, at a desk. The hot kind, a man in your face who needs you to be worthless, doesn't appear.

Baumeister got the outside view, comprehensively. Perpetrators almost never see themselves as evil. Victims and perpetrators remember the same event differently, in the same directions, every time. Revenge escalates. The "myth of pure evil" is his phrase and it's the right one.

What he's written is a catalogue of how people get there. What I'm after is what happens in the room: what one person shows another, without saying

it, and what the other does with it. That's a different question, and I don't think his answers it.

Bandura got the machinery, in more detail than anyone: euphemism, displacement, diffusion, minimising, victim-blaming, dehumanisation. If you want the list of moves, it's his.

His moves are described as techniques a person uses. Mine is a single act, not a list: a turning-away that requires and produces all of them. I think his catalogue is the shape that one act makes when you observe it from outside and write down what you see.

Braithwaite got the two strangers, with data. Shaming that condemns the act while keeping the person inside the circle produces reform; shaming that converts the act into an identity produces recidivism and criminal subcultures. That is my Chapter 1, tested at scale in the criminal justice system, and I should have found it years earlier than I did.

Where it stops is the *why*. He shows that stigmatising shaming makes people worse. He doesn't say what stigmatising shaming *is*: what passes through it, why it's the one form of harm that leaves no evidence, or why the person delivering it can't see what he's doing. That's most of this book.

Murdoch is the closest of all of them, and the one I found last. For her the moral work is not in choosing. It's in looking, in whether you can see another person as they actually are, rather than through the story your own self-regard is telling. She thought the fantasy comes first and corrupts perception, and that by the time you get to a choice, the important thing has already happened.

That is the ground this book stands on, laid forty years earlier, by a better philosopher. It isn't the book's claim. The claim is what happens when two people are looking, or failing to, at each other.

Where it stops is that her looking is a private discipline. One person, attending. What I keep finding is that the failure to look is *transacted*: it's shown to somebody, received by them, and reproduced in them. Murdoch

tells you what seeing is and why it's hard. She doesn't describe two people making each other blind.

Fingarette got limbo, precisely. Self-deception, in his account, isn't believing a falsehood; it's declining to *spell out* what you're already engaged in. I have not improved on that, and the word "limbo" is my name for his thing. He, too, keeps it inside one skull.

Trivers got the leak. His argument is that self-deception evolved because it makes you a better deceiver of others: you sell it more convincingly when you believe it. And he noticed that the deception leaks: it shows.

For him the leak is a cost. A defect in an otherwise good system. The whole of my argument is that the leak is the *point*: that what leaks is precisely what the thing needs the other person to receive, because their receiving it is what makes them react, and their reaction is what completes the job. If I'm right about anything, it's that inversion.

Projective identification is the closest of all, and I should have started here. Klein, and Bion and Ogden after her, describe a person disowning something, locating it in another, and then, without knowing it, behaving so as to make the other feel or enact it, and meeting the result as confirmation. The relational analysts have spent decades inside exactly the two-person transaction I was about to say nobody had entered. So that claim is false, and I withdraw it.

What survives is narrower than I first said. In projective identification the induction runs through pressure, and the not-knowing is a precondition. Here the concealment is itself the message. What the target reads is not a feeling that's been pushed into them but the other man's relation to what he himself knows. The deniability isn't a side effect; the thing can't work without it. Both parties' dark parts gain from the exchange. And what gets taught is distrust of conscience as such. Those five are what I'm claiming, and no more.

Now the thing worth noticing, which I didn't expect when I started making this list.

Most of them stop in the same place, and the one that doesn't stops one step later.

Jung has it inside one psyche. Fingarette has it inside one skull. Murdoch has one person attending. Arendt has one man not thinking. Bandura has an individual's techniques. Baumeister has two accounts of the same event that never meet. Girard jumps to the crowd and skips the pair entirely.

The gap the rest leave is the same gap: **what happens between exactly two people, when each one's not-knowing is required by the other.**

I don't think that's a coincidence, and I don't think it's an oversight by a series of careful thinkers. I think it's what you'd expect, given what the thing is. A transaction whose whole function is to leave no evidence is going to be hardest to see in exactly the place where it happens, and easiest to see in its aftermath: in the psyche it distorted, in the crowd it organised, in the statistics it produced. Every one of these accounts is looking at the wreckage. That's not a criticism. The wreckage is easier to look at, and I only got to the other thing because it was done to me and I had, for once, no way of not noticing.

There's a second reason, and I think it's the deeper one. The transaction can only be seen by holding that he knew and didn't know at once, and every one of these traditions, at the crucial moment, picks a side. Jung's projection is unconscious. Arendt's thoughtlessness is an absence. Bandura's disengagement is a technique. Fingarette comes closest, with "declining to spell out," and even he keeps it in one head. Pick a side and the two-person transaction disappears, because it lives exactly on the line between them.

So: the conclusions in this book are ancient, and I'd rather stand with that company than pretend otherwise. What I'm claiming is one mechanism, in one room, between two people, and five features of it I can't find in the account closest to mine. If it holds, it's the thing all of the above are

downstream of. If it doesn't, most of what they said is still true, and I've added nothing.

What the research already half-holds

Three findings make the book's asymmetry less strange than it sounds. People treat morally good actions and changes as more revealing of a person's true self than bad ones, across cultures and even among misanthropes (Newman, Bloom and Knobe; De Freitas and colleagues). Partisans attribute their own side's aggression to love and the other side's to hate, and the asymmetry predicts unwillingness to compromise (Waytz, Young and Ginges). And ordinary life runs on a passive failure to represent other minds at all, which Waytz and Schroeder call dehumanization by omission and Harris and Fiske measured as a spontaneous failure to consider another's mind. None of this is evidence for the metaphysics. It shows that readers already believe goodness is more fundamental than evil, and then act as if evil were a substance whenever they need somebody to be one.

Appendix 3: What the Traditions Named

Written by Claude, with my guidance.

Appendix 2 was about the thinkers who saw the mechanism. This is about the traditions that named the thing. Nothing in the book depends on it. I'm including it because some of my early readers practice in these traditions, because the names they chose turn out to carry the book's central paradox, and because I want to be clear about which parts of this book are borrowed and which are mine.

Dzogchen and Mahamudra

Anyone who has done Dzogchen or Mahamudra practice will have recognized the architecture several sections ago. I want to name the correspondences, since it costs nothing and since pretending to have invented them would be its own small act of hiding.

What I've been calling the turning-away is *marigpa*, which is not a thing and not an act—the word means non-recognition. What I've called the parasite having no substance of its own is the standard position that afflictions arise as display, with no independent existence. What I've called “it isn't what you are” is the teaching that the obscurations are adventitious: they never touch the nature they obscure. And what I've called “you can't decide to look, but you can train how fast you catch it” is non-fabrication plus familiarization—the recognition can't be manufactured, and the path is repeated recognition rather than repair.

Two of these are more than parallels.

The first is that this tradition already answers the question I've been circling: how does a turned mind turn itself? It doesn't. Recognition isn't produced by thinking; it's introduced, by someone who is in it, in a way that isn't an argument. That's called pointing-out instruction. It has the same shape as what the second stranger did to you, and I don't mean the two are the same thing; one is a specialized transmission and the other was a moment on a street. He didn't put anything into you and he didn't win a debate. He made recognition possible and it happened by itself. If that

move seemed too slight to be the whole answer, there's a twelve-hundred-year-old body of technique built on the claim that it's the only thing that works.

The second is the Aspiration Prayer of Samantabhadra, which answers the question I flagged as unanswerable. One ground; from it, appearances arise; Samantabhadra recognizes them as his own display and is free in that instant; beings don't recognize, and wander. Same ground, same arising. And the not-recognizing is not a rebellion or a sin or a choice. It's described as a momentary blankness, with no motive given—and the sense of self and other arises *after* it, not before. There was no one there yet to want anything. That is the answer to the regress I got stuck on: the first turning-away doesn't need a cause, because it was never an act.

You'll have noticed that this sits differently from the fear I described in Part E of the map, where the turning begins with the fear of having left home. I hold both, in this order: the blank comes first, and the fear is what the blank feels like once there's someone there to feel it. Projection—making the other one guilty—is the first thing that someone does. On that reading the fear isn't the cause of the first not-seeing; it's the first content of the self that not-seeing produced. If that's wrong, the mistake is mine and not the traditions'.

The wider Mahayana, and the ego

One more correspondence, and I haven't finished working it out, so hold it loosely. What I've called the parasite is not "ego" in the everyday sense, a big personality or a bad attitude. It's closer to what the Mahayana calls self-cherishing: the mind that counts itself as the one exception, which Shantideva names as the source of every harm and which the mind-training texts tell you to treat as the single enemy, while denying in the same breath that it is a thing. That is the paradox from section 13 exactly, a nothing that has to be fought like a something. The exception is the ego. The parasite is the ego defending the exception, and self-righteous contempt is the defense at full volume, which is why the word has "self" in it. Every tradition that

looked at this noticed the same thing about where it hides: in the last place you'd ever look, behind your own eyes, convincing you it isn't there. The Christians gave that trick to Satan. The Buddhists gave it to the self. I think they were describing one thing.

The clearest modern statement of it I know doesn't come from a monastery. Angelo DiLullo, a contemporary teacher in the nondual line: "The ego doesn't tell you what it thinks. It doesn't tell you what it wants you to think. In fact, it doesn't even tell you what you think. Ego does the thinking for you." That is the parasite exactly as Chapter 1 met it. It speaks in your voice, so its view arrives as your view, and you never notice a second speaker because there was only ever one voice in the room. DiLullo points to a scene in the film *Revolver* for the same idea: the enemy behind everything, hiding in the last place you'd ever look, behind your own eyes. Put that beside Eckhart below and the two traditions are saying one sentence.

Christianity: privation, and the devil's one trick

The Christian tradition names the same thing from the other side. Augustine's evil is a privation, an absence with no substance of its own, and the *Enchiridion* is the earliest statement I know of the paradox in Part D: nothing to point at, and everything to fight. Eckhart is sharper. *The devil is none other than the will turned away from God. When the will turns from the One, it becomes its own devil.* That is the turning-away, named as Satan seven centuries ago, and the absence is kept intact: there's no creature in it, only a direction. And the trick every tradition gives the devil, convincing you he doesn't exist, is in this book the parasite's whole method, hiding behind your own eyes in the last place you'd look. The line I opened the book with, from the Gospel of Philip, says what to do about it and says it's enough. I should be honest about one difference. Augustine keeps the will and the guilt where I keep innocence and the catching of yourself. The privation is shared; the account of responsibility isn't.

A Course in Miracles

A Course in Miracles, in Kenneth Wapnick's reading, is the nearest thing to the fear account in Part E: the ego is nothing but the belief in separation, and its one strategy is to keep the guilt out there. I got there by a different road. That's where the roads meet.

What's mine, and a caution

Where I go beyond what all of these say, and you should hold it as mine: none of them claim that non-recognition coordinates across minds. That's the whole middle of this book, and it isn't in them.

One more thing is mine, though the conclusion isn't. No single tradition here states the whole of it. Between them they hold the pieces: a nature that is there before anything is acquired, ignorance as non-recognition rather than corruption, recognition as the way back, and, in the Mahayana line, care as belonging to that nature. Each got to its piece by practice or revelation. This book gets there by a different road: the anatomy of a bad act. You can't harm somebody while looking at them, so the harm needs a hiding, and nobody builds machinery that elaborate to keep something from a part of themselves that doesn't care. The size of the hiding is the measure of the care. The road starts from your worst moment rather than your best. Mencius's child at the well is the nearest thing I know, and it runs on the good moment; Augustine's privation has the same shape at the level of metaphysics, since an absence is an absence *of* something, and that something is what's real. What I add is the psychology, two places to look that nobody had pointed at as places, limbo and contempt, and that you can run it on yourself in an afternoon. I should be careful about how much that convergence proves. The roads are independent in their evidence; the gaze experiment and the anatomy of contempt borrow nothing from any tradition, though the words I reach for at the end, care, recognition, turning toward, are theirs. They aren't independent in method: both rest on disciplined looking from the inside, so they can share a blind spot. And my road underdetermines the destination. It shows that something countervailing is there and has to be concealed; the step from that to "care is what awareness

is” is abductive, and rival accounts, an evolved empathy, shame, the cost of admitting, have to be argued against rather than passed over, and I haven’t done that yet. What I’ll claim is this much. The traditions’ account makes unexpectedly good sense of what you found in Chapter 1, and what you found there is a small piece of evidence for them. The hiding proves that something countervailing is being registered; that the something is care, and not only fear of being seen, is what the gaze experiment asks you to check, since nobody was watching.

And one caution, mostly for me. The easiest way to misread non-fabrication is as *nothing to do*. That reading is available in every one of these correspondences, and it produces the second half of the paradox—the complicity half—in a form that feels like attainment. Whatever else this book is, it isn’t permission.

Where This Goes

Written by Claude, with my extensive guidance.

A map of the rest of the book, for early readers. Placed after Chapter 5, which is the short version of everything here. This will not be in the finished book.

Chapter 5 said the whole thing once, with less evidence than any of it deserves. This is the middle length: the same claims, walked through with more of what stands behind each, in the order the finished book will take. Two pieces of the big claim need slowing down on first, because everything turns on them.

In them: the same thing, deeper

Picture a soldier in the middle of an atrocity. He has been taught to see the people in front of him as less than people, and he is doing what that makes possible. While it's happening, it feels like him. Not like something has come over him. Like him, doing the obvious thing, with the confidence of a man who is right.

Now imagine he could see two days side by side: that day, and a day twenty years earlier when he was serving food at a shelter. Both felt righteous while they were happening.

Looking at both, he'll say: *that wasn't me*.

And everyone will roll their eyes, because we've all heard that excuse. It's contemptible, and we know it.

But "that wasn't me" can come from two completely different places. The excuse we hate comes from a man who is still turned away. He still needs what he did to have been fine, and "that wasn't me" is just one more story that makes it fine. The soldier I'm describing is in a different position. He can see both days at once, and he isn't trying to make anything fine. From where he's standing, "that wasn't me" isn't an excuse. It's the most accurate thing he can say. Something was using his eyes and his certainty. He was

there for all of it. And it was not what he is. He'll tell you that, and in the same breath he'll tell you he did it.

That isn't exoneration. That's accurate reporting, from the only place you can see both from.

Now the people we call evil. They're that soldier on the day of the atrocity, with no other day to compare it to. From inside, it feels like them, completely—as much like themselves as you feel like yourself right now. That isn't reassuring. It's the whole problem.

And you have your own two days. The argument you won last week, where you were so plainly right. The time you helped someone and forgot about yourself entirely. You have never once put them side by side. While each was happening, it was simply you.

Same parasite. It has more of them than it has of you. That's the only difference.

In you: the sorting

I said the hatred of corruption comes from the real you, and the hatred of people from the parasite. Here's how to tell them apart in yourself. They arrive together, and the second one dresses like the first.

Start with the hatred of the corruption. It's the part that can't stand to watch people get hurt and wants it stopped. Nothing in this book asks you to feel that less. It's the most trustworthy thing in you.

Now watch what happens the moment the corruption gets a face.

The heat changes. It stops being about the harm and starts being about the person. You want them to *know* what they are. Something in you would be disappointed if they got better. That second heat feels like the first one, only more serious. More willing to act. It isn't the same thing at all. It's the parasite, using the voice of your conscience, telling you that this is what caring looks like once it's finally serious.

You can check this right now, on whoever you're carrying. Where does the rage sit: on the harm, or on the face? And if the harm simply stopped tomorrow, with no one punished and no one exposed, would you feel relief—or robbed?

That question is most of the practice. The rage at the harm is the real you. The rage at the person is the parasite. And this is how it gets you: it shows you real evil, which you're right about, and then offers to handle it for you.

Here's why the sorting matters. Rage at the harm, kept off the face, is what the second stranger did. He wasn't gentle. He was angry at what you did, and he never once made it about what you are. Which meant his anger had nothing in it for your parasite to use. No contempt to feed on. No hypocrisy to point at. So it went past your parasite and landed on the part of you underneath, and that part recognized something. Not an enemy. Someone on its side, against the thing that had been using you.

That's the other handshake. There's one between parasites, and it's called contempt. There's one between the parts underneath, and it's what the second stranger did. It doesn't need to be nice. It can be fierce. It can, when it has to, be violent: you can be fighting someone with everything you've got and still be talking to the part of them underneath. The one thing it can't be is contemptuous, because contempt is the parasite's own handshake, and the moment you offer it, you've switched sides.

So why can't you just do that? Keep the first rage, drop the second, and go be the second stranger?

Because the parasite doesn't just use your hands. It uses your thinking, and then your seeing, and by the time it's done, your world looks like a world in which those people really are what you decided they are. That's Part A. Then how that scales to everything we build together: Part B. Then the people we call evil, and what you owe the one who hurt you: Part C. Then the only lever there is, and what the parasite turns out to be made of: Part D. Then, set apart, what I believe: Part E. Then what the book is for.

Part A: Why you can't think your way out

1. It hijacks your reasoning

You have a faculty that senses its way toward what is good. You met it in Chapter 1. It knew you were doing wrong before you'd done any calculating, and it couldn't tell you how it knew. That isn't a defect. That's what it is: a sense, not a rulebook. It can't define the good any more than your eyes can define red.

And it isn't a detector. It doesn't sit there evaluating conduct. Chapter 2 named what it actually is: the part of you that *cares*—about people, about animals, about the world—and what registers as wrong is whatever cuts against that. Hold onto that. It's the difference between a book about ethics and a book about what has happened to us.

Because it can't define it, we stop trusting it. The other part—the one that reasons, that can make a case—can always produce something to show. So we run on that instead, and it feels like trading a vague instrument for a precise one.

We haven't. Reason cut off from that faculty isn't a poor substitute for it. It isn't doing the same job at all. Sensing toward the good is something it never once tries. What it does instead is produce stories about how we already are good, and it is superb at that.

That's what the first stranger was doing. He wasn't a bad man who had thrown away his conscience. He was an ordinary man running on the arguing side alone, which produced a story in which he was the good one, and everything he saw confirmed it.

We're all lost in some version of this disorientation, to some degree, most of the time. Me included.

We don't notice because the faculty that senses the good is also the only thing that can tell you you've drifted from it. Demote it and you've silenced the alarm. What's left is a picture of the good that feels like the good—same word, same warmth—with nothing connecting it to the real thing

anymore. So it can drift, and there's no limit on how far. A counterfeit with no original to check against can become anything, and every step of the way it will feel like being right.

Now scale that up.

Every grand plan for doing good—every ideology, every agenda, every “I’ll accumulate wealth and power now and deploy it for the world later”—is built by the arguing side, and the arguing side’s job is to route around what you already know. So when you ask “is this good?” and your mind hands you a proof, you haven’t learned whether it’s good. You’ve learned that the part of you that manufactures justifications has been put to work.

It’s why the aftermath of an institutional disaster looks the way it does. Someone asks how anyone could have known, and then the inquiry finds the memo. There is nearly always a memo, and someone who raised it, and a reason on file for why the concern didn’t hold. The reason wasn’t a lie. It convinced people. That’s the point: the proof existed so that nobody would have to listen to the thing that already knew.

We build rules and moral systems less to make ourselves good than to let ourselves stop paying attention. It’s easier to follow a rule than to stay fully present to what a situation is asking of you. Rules let you say “I did the right thing” without feeling the weight of it. That’s their appeal, and it’s why goodness can’t be formalized: any definition of “good” can be obeyed to the letter while betraying its spirit, and the parasite is extraordinarily good at finding the letter. The belief that metrics can tell us whether we’re on the right track is the same belief, moved outside the skull.

One test for any grand narrative: does it require you to have contempt for what’s right in front of you—this person, this place, this moment—in service of some future good? If so, it is almost certainly not coming from the part of you that cares, and it will not do what its proof says it will.

None of this is an argument against thinking. Thinking is indispensable, *in service* of the part that knows; it’s how conscience gets anything done. What

it cannot do is replace that part, or tell you whether it's been hijacked. You need something deeper than thought to check that.

I'll be accused here of defining conscience as whatever happens to agree with me, since I can't define it or prove which inner voice is which. The honest answer is that I can give you clues but not rules, and that the impossibility of a rule is the point. A rule is what the counterfeit needs. The clues are in section 12.

So let me say now what that commits me to. Nothing in this book is a rule, and nothing in it will be. I'm not going to tell you that self-interest is wrong, or anger, or punishment, or making an exception of yourself. Each of those is sometimes right. The moment I hand you a rule, your conscience gets a substitute to hide behind, and the part of you that argues gets a letter to satisfy. What I can give you are clues. A clue you can be wrong about. A rule you can obey.

2. Then it hijacks your perception

That's what it does to your thinking. What makes this a trap is what it does to your seeing.

Once the verdict is in—*this is what they are*—the person in front of you starts to look like the verdict. Every gesture confirms it. It doesn't feel like an interpretation you're adding. It feels like what's there. You can check this against your own memory: think of someone you once despised and later came to see differently. At the time, were you *interpreting* them as rotten? Or were you just seeing it?

That's the hijack. Your world becomes indistinguishable from a world in which they really are that. So in what sense aren't they? Only this: there is more of them there, and it isn't reaching you. And you can't tell that it isn't, because the only thing that could tell you is the thing you turned away from.

This is why good intentions don't fix it. You cannot simply decide to look. Deciding is done with the equipment that's already turned, so the decision

comes out turned. This is not a fight between a good part of you and a bad part, which you could win by trying harder. There's nothing there to fight. There's a not-looking, and it ends when looking becomes possible again.

Which is why the second stranger worked and the first didn't. He didn't win an argument with you. He made looking survivable, by taking what you are off the table, and then you looked. And it's why contempt can't do that, however deserved. It puts what you are on trial, and looking becomes the most dangerous thing you could do.

So this is where "evil people" live. In a world where their victims really are what they seem. Not a world they chose. A world that looks, from inside, like the truth. Which raises the obvious objection: then why can't we just do what the second stranger did, to the worst people, and fix them? I have two answers, and neither is comforting. The deeper someone is in, the more has to be true around them before looking is survivable, and one person's dignity is usually nowhere near enough. And I don't know whether there's a point past which nobody can be reached. I suspect there is. What I do know is which direction contempt moves them, and it's not toward. When we hold the verdict, we aren't opening the cage. We're welding it shut.

This is the drift from section 1, seen from inside. The counterfeit good and the real one share a word—*righteous*—and at first they share a feeling. You can only choose the counterfeit by forgetting what the real one feels like, and the further you follow it, the less of the real one you have left to compare it to. Eventually there's nothing to compare it *to*. The soldier isn't confused about whether he's righteous. He's in a world where he is.

Here is the claim everything in this book depends on: **two acts that look identical from outside can have opposite effects, because they come from different places.** You verified it with the two strangers. The difference wasn't in what they said or how hard they said it. It was in whether they were looking. Nothing auditable captures that. Which is why our arguments about policy, which are arguments about the auditable part, so rarely touch what decides the outcome. And it's why you can't tell from

the outside whether you're the second stranger or the first. From outside, they look the same. Even to you.

I'm avoiding the words *good* and *harmful* here on purpose. Whether an act helps is a further question, and often a hard one; there are people for whom the most helpful thing is prison. What Chapter 1 showed you is narrower and more certain than that. One of those men made it easier for you to turn away from what you knew. The other made it harder. That difference is real, you felt it, and nothing in any record of the encounter would show it. One clue you can use right now: the next time you're acting from contempt, notice how *sure* you are that it's good. The real thing doesn't have that quality. It doesn't need to be sure. It's just doing what's in front of it.

3. What contempt is, from the inside

If you take one sentence from this book, take this one.

When you feel contempt, what you're feeling is a tug to be recruited into the thing you hate.

It isn't a signal that you've spotted evil. It's the feeling of evil recruiting you, and it uses your accurate perception of it as the hook. You saw that with the stranger: he was right that there was darkness in you. He was recruited by it anyway, into doing the thing that fed it. The accuracy is what makes the tug so hard to refuse.

There's a name for the form this takes when the harm is real, and I'll use it: self-righteous contempt, not righteous, because that word has to keep its real meaning in this book. The second stranger was righteous, and nothing about him was contemptuous. The "self" is the tell. It says whose account the righteousness is being credited to, and that's the difference between the real thing and the counterfeit that dresses in its clothes. Two things to check about it, in order, and the first is easy. Look straight at what you feel toward the worst person you can think of, at the moment the verdict lands, and see whether it's anything but malevolence. I don't mean the wish to stop them. I mean the heat, the part that wants them to know what they

are. I've never found anything else in there. Look and see what you find. The second is harder, and you reach it the same way. If that's what it's made of, then it's made of the very thing you're aiming it at, and its natural direction is to reproduce itself: it reaches for the same thing in the other person and tries to wake it up. It doesn't always succeed. Sometimes the person turns toward anyway. But whatever turned them didn't come from the contemptuous part. The skill isn't seeing that; you can see it now. The skill is not hiding it from yourself again by the time you've finished the sentence.

Look at the thing that's being pushed aside. Ask a room of hardened soldiers whether it's wrong to desecrate an enemy's corpse. They'll say yes, nearly all of them, instantly. Then ask them what the harm is. The person is dead. Nobody's watching. No rule is being enforced. They won't be able to tell you, and they won't budge either. That's conscience caught in the act: it knows, it can't prove, and it doesn't need to.

Now the cost. I think this is where the damage to whole societies begins. Every act of contempt teaches the same lesson to everyone it touches: that the inner knowing is worthless. If good and evil can't be told apart from the outside, and the world only rewards the outside, why listen to the part that can't prove anything? That is how a culture that trusts only proof gets built, one interaction at a time. And a culture that trusts only proof is one in which the single faculty capable of detecting this whole thing has been demoted to the "spiritual," where it can be safely ignored.

4. How much of your life is in there

So far we've looked at one kind of moment: being caught, or being the one doing the catching. Now much more widely, and this part isn't comfortable. The claim is that limbo isn't a rare exception. It's the ordinary condition of most of what we do.

Consider the feeling of an action that serves two purposes. "Yes, this benefits me, but it *also* helps others." You can even feel the balance; it feels

like a reasonable compromise. Now check whether a deeper part of you knows that the “helps others” half is the fig leaf, and the other half is the point. Not always. But far more often than we’d like.

Consider the small thrill of getting away with something. Underreporting a little on your taxes. Keeping the extra change. *I’m just sticking it to the man.* And notice that the thrill is itself the evidence: some part of you registered exactly what you did.

Consider how easy it is to see all this in your enemies and how hard in your allies, and that the difference has nothing to do with who’s doing it more.

It can be much subtler than that. Being unwilling to really hear someone’s experience. “That person is stupid for feeling that way.” Looking at the people around you, on some days, as though they’re extras in your movie. Each of these is a turning away from the life in someone, and each carries the same signature, however faint.

And one more, which anyone who argues for a living will recognize. The uncharitable reading. You take what your opponent said and read it so that it’s stupid, or cruel, or self-serving, when a version that isn’t was right there and you knew it. You’d never accept that reading of your own words. That’s the tell. It’s the same exception, applied to how you read people, and it needs the same not-looking, because the fair reading was right there and had to be pushed out of view. I’ve done it in this book, to thinkers I admire, and had to go back. Watch for it in yourself. It’s the most respectable form the parasite takes.

And there’s a kind of limbo that doesn’t look like contempt at all, and nobody calls it that, and it may do more damage than the obvious kind. Watch someone pushing an agenda that happens to serve them or their group. A policy, a hiring decision, a family argument about who gets what. Nothing hostile is said. But there’s a look, a slight hardening, a readiness, and everyone in the room reads it. The person knows they’re wearing it and doesn’t. That look is limbo. It’s the stranger’s tell without the stranger’s heat. And it teaches everyone watching the same lesson contempt teaches:

that the game is what's real, and the part that knows better is for suckers. Most of what we call politics is this.

And here's a move I made for years: *I can see self-deception so clearly in other people. If I were doing it, I'd see it in myself. I don't, so I'm not.* The clarity about them became the proof about me. That's the mechanism using its own detector as cover.

And notice what we call it. When it's mine, it's "unconscious." When it's yours, it's "conscious," and you knew exactly what you were doing. It's the same state with two names, and which name it gets depends on whose it is. Both names leave out the thing that makes it what it is, which is that the knowledge was there and wasn't admitted, and each of them serves the person doing the naming. "Unconscious" gets me off the hook. "Conscious" licenses what I do to you.

There are places where the softer word looks like the kind one. Tell a room of decent people that their bias is intentional and they stop listening. Tell them it's unconscious and they relax. But look at what the soft word does. It picks a side. It tells them the knowledge wasn't available, and it was, and saying it wasn't is the demotion the first stranger taught you. That isn't kindness. It's niceness, which is the other way of collapsing it.

The second stranger didn't do that. He held both halves and it cost him nothing, because both are true. What you did is unacceptable, and you knew, and you are better than it. That's why he was harsh, and it's why it landed as kindness. The honest frame is his frame. You knew. You didn't let yourself know. And that is not a verdict on what you are.

Psychology has names for pieces of this, and I should say how they relate to what I've been describing, because a reader who knows them will be waiting. Motivated reasoning: my conclusion counts for more than the truth. Status defense: I count for more. Shame avoidance: my self-image counts for more than accuracy. The reward of dominance: I'm above. These aren't rivals to the account. They're what the parasite is built from, and every one of them is the same assertion at a different level: an exception,

made for oneself, that has to be kept out of view. What makes that more than relabeling is that it predicts something. If they're one thing, they should share one blind spot of one shape, and it should fail the same way for all of them: put the thing looked away from back in view, and the mechanism stops. For motivated reasoning that's already been found. People stop searching the moment they reach the conclusion they wanted, and keep searching, past it, when the conclusion is one they didn't want. That's a not-looking with a direction. It's the stranger's tell, measured.

The point of this section isn't to make you feel rotten. It's to establish scope. Nothing about what happened between you and the stranger was a special event. It's the water we swim in.

Part B: How it scales

Before asking how it scales, ask why this wrong is the one that got out of hand. There's a reason, and it isn't a coincidence.

Start with what the interlude found: *this doesn't apply to me* and *you're not really one of us* are one assertion, pointed in opposite directions, and one faculty catches both. Cheating and contempt were the first two cases. Now look at contempt more closely, because it isn't just a second example. It's a self-exception in its own right. Nobody accepts being treated with contempt. Nobody has ever thought the rule stopped applying the moment it was pointed at them. So when you aim it at somebody, you're claiming the thing holds for everyone except you, right now, in this case, for reasons. Which is the cheating move exactly.

Now put the two halves together. To cheat, you needed to believe you'd get away with it. Contempt is the version where you always do. There's no transcript, no record, nothing anyone can hold up afterward. So it's the one form of this you can perform in front of witnesses, at full strength, and be admired for.

And there's a third thing, which you can check right now. Bring up a scene of somebody confronting something evil, fiercely, and completely cleanly. No contempt in it, just refusal. It feels good to watch. Something in you stands up. Now bring up a scene of somebody doing it with contempt. A takedown. Somebody getting exactly what they had coming, delivered with relish. That feels good too. But compare the two feelings, because they are not the same feeling. The second one has a charge in it. There's a *fuck yes* in there, and it's hot, and a little violent, and it wants more. It isn't the feeling of watching something be protected. It's the feeling of watching something be crushed, and being allowed to enjoy it. Most of us have had that feeling thousands of times without once thinking of ourselves as people who enjoy watching people get crushed. That's limbo, in the audience seat. Chapter 1 gave you the target's seat and the perpetrator's. This is a third, and most contempt is consumed from it, not performed.

So here's why this particular wrong is the one that scales. Take any other kind. Theft leaves evidence. Violence is visible. Lying can be checked against the truth. Every one of them can, in principle, be caught and named. Contempt leaves no record, so it can't be proven. It arrives dressed as duty, so it needn't be defended. It's performed in public and rewarded there. And the watching is pleasurable, which means it spreads through people who never did anything at all. I can't find another wrong with that set of properties. That's why it gets a book rather than a paragraph.

(This book was going to be called *Contempt Is Evil*. I dropped it, because a title like that reads as a judgment being passed, and it isn't one. It's meant the way you'd say a shape is a triangle. I'd like to keep the sentence, and I'd like it to mean the flat thing. Section 9 says it.)

5. Hot and cold

Before going any wider, I need to separate two things the word "contempt" has been carrying. Both of them scale. But they scale differently, and the second one is where most of the damage is.

The first stranger was turned away from you while still looking at you. He could still hear the protest. That's why he needed you to be bad, why he had to keep watching you, why he worked so hard. Call that contempt proper: an incomplete turning away, with the fight still on.

But there's a second form. The turning away is so complete that nothing protests anymore. No need, no gaze, no heat. The other simply isn't in view. The executive signing off on the cheaper part that he knows will fail more often. The shopper not thinking about the feedlot. The planner for whom a village is a number. From the inside it doesn't feel like contempt, because it doesn't feel like anything. From the outside it looks like nobody home: the same absence you saw in the dehumanizing gaze, minus the fight.

Cold isn't milder than hot. It's further along. What I was dropped into in Chapter 2 was the cold form with appetite added: no life perceived at all, so nothing left to stop it.

And it's the same parasite. Hot is the parasite while it's still being fought: the protest is still audible, so it has to work, and that work is what you saw on the street. Cold is the parasite once it has won. Nothing protests any more, so nothing needs proving, and the only trace it leaves is a reason on file somewhere. The executive's memo is the first stranger's gaze with the fight taken out. Don't let the calm fool you about what's running.

From here on I'll keep "contempt" for the hot form and mostly say "turning away" for what the two share, because what they share is the point. The life in whatever is in front of you isn't hidden. It's right there. Hot and cold are two distances of not looking at it. Most of the harm in the world runs on the cold one, and almost none of it looks like anything.

6. Shadow spaces and the background hum

Here's something you've felt. A coworker mentions someone who isn't there—"Dave's working from home again"—with a particular weight on it. Nothing you could quote back. But you know what's being offered: a chance to agree, without either of you saying so, that Dave is a slacker and the two of you are not. And you know which signal would accept it: a small laugh, an eye-roll, "must be nice." If you send it, something opens between you, and for a moment it feels like closeness.

The book will call those openings **shadow spaces**: temporary alliances in which our parasites recognize each other and coordinate, while our conscious minds keep the story clean. The guy who "forgot" some cash income on his taxes and points at corporate loopholes as though they license him. The remark about a colleague that is *testing* something, and the reply that isn't "that's not okay" but "careful, HR's everywhere." Gossip dressed as concern. Performed virtue, with everyone quietly relieved they won't have to actually change.

None of these are bad people. They coach little league. They volunteer. They have real moments of integrity. And each of them, having turned

away from their conscience in one place, finds it a little easier to turn away in the next. The content is completely different. The move is identical.

Then there are the rooms where we do it *together*. Put ten men in a locker room. Most of them are decent. Not one of them would say what's being said in there if you took him aside. Together they produce something: it has a mood and a direction, nobody proposed it, and each man is slightly less himself than he was an hour ago. Ask any of them afterward what happened and you'll get a shrug. Nothing happened. But you can feel it from the doorway, the same way you felt the stranger, on the same non-existent evidence. And it has all the marks of a plan: it escalates, it shuts down anyone who hesitates, and it stops the instant someone's wife walks in. Ten parasites, behaving as one. Call it a small devil if you like. The men in that room would laugh, and they'd be wrong.

Notice what the room does to you, too. Walk in on it and there's a pull to join. Decline that, and there's a second pull, just as strong: to despise them. Both are the same thing offering you a way in. It can recruit you into the room or against it, and it doesn't care which.

The same room forms wherever people gather against a shared enemy. The strategy meeting that slides, one defensible sentence at a time, from "we need to stop them" to "honestly, fuck these people," while the minutes stay clean. War rooms. Campaigns. Activist groups sliding from justice into vengeance. Nobody in any of them decided to be cruel.

And underneath all of it, the background hum: the casual contempt we hurl at each other all day, most of it too small to notice. Comment sections. "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes." Each one negligible on its own. Together they set the baseline: how dark everyone assumes the world is, how much everyone feels licensed to protect themselves. The executive making his harmful decision, the politician telling her lie—they're swimming in that. It has made the world just dark enough that their self-deception is easy to justify.

Now the uncomfortable part. Our small shadows *need* the large ones. If integrity were the norm, your small acts of self-deception would stand out, and you'd feel pressure to confront them. As long as there's systemic corruption to point at, your parasite has cover. So it doesn't merely believe in corrupt elites. It needs them. Every time we point at their corruption while indulging our own, we make a trade: we keep our small shadow spaces, and in exchange we feed the large ones.

Your contempt for them isn't putting them out of business. It's keeping them in it. Whether some part of you knew that all along, only you can say.

One more thing before we leave the shadow spaces. Go back over the examples in this section and notice which ones made you feel contempt and which ones you were inclined to let go. The ones you let go are closer to your own. Something did that sorting for you, before you'd thought about it, and it decided which shadows were safe to judge. Notice that. The most effective shadow is the one cast by a righteous purpose.

7. Plausible deniability, at scale

The stranger's split—one part doing the work, another keeping its hands clean—isn't a quirk of his. Every parasite needs it, because it can't work if its host can see it working. And it left him only channels that couldn't be audited: tone, gaze, manner. Now put a thousand hosts in one building, each needing the same thing at once, and ask what they build. Policy. Procedure. Incentive. Omission. Channels in which nobody ever has to look at anybody. A locker room needs no structure; it forms on its own and dissolves when the wife walks in. An institution is what you get when the need for not-looking is made permanent.

Take a CEO who is deep in—one whose parasite has a great deal of him. It doesn't stay in him. It travels through everything he builds: the contempt in his public statements, the rationalizations that harden into the company's culture, the assumptions built into what it makes, the people he hires and the incentives he sets. Thousands of people then act from a turning-away

that isn't even theirs, and none of them can find it, because it isn't in any one place.

And a society has the same structure a person does. It has agencies that do what its citizens would never sanction, so that the citizens never have to. The shadowy operator in the basement of the government isn't a different kind of person. He's the physical form of a part we've all disowned, doing our dirty work so we can keep our hands clean. We know, and we don't, in exactly the proportions the first stranger did.

That's the bridge from one man to a civilization. The second half of the book crosses it.

8. The marks it leaves on a culture

If all that is true, it should have left marks on the culture, and the book will walk through them.

It's received wisdom that humans are *fundamentally* selfish and greedy. Does that belief make anyone kinder? Can you feel that it's sending the same message the first stranger sent—*this world is a dark place, look out for yourself*—and having the same effect? If the thing draws power from one person doing that to another, what does it draw from an entire species believing it together, as something impolite to question?

Hollywood produces revenge fantasies by the hundred, each one reminding us that irredeemable people exist and are best handled with primally satisfying violence. Did anyone need to plan that?

Wise people across every tradition tell us to have compassion for wrongdoers, and our culture treats it as naive.

And we treat the living world as inventory. A forest is timber; a river is a route for waste; an animal is a unit. You don't need any metaphysics to check this one. Stand in front of a living thing, look at it as inventory, and notice what you had to stop doing in order to see it that way. It's the same not-looking, the cold form, applied to everything that isn't us. The collapse

of the biosphere is what that looks like from outside: our turning-away, made physical.

(Whether the not-looking goes deeper than that—whether it reaches all the way down to how we see matter itself—I’ll hold for Part E, because it’s metaphysics, and I don’t want it carrying weight it hasn’t earned.)

9. The conspiracy

Two parasites make a handshake. Ten make a locker room. A thousand build an institution. Now take all of them: every parasite in every mind, cooperating the way the two of you did, at the size of the whole species. That doesn’t look like billions of small things. It looks like one enormous thing with one purpose: to keep every human being looking outward, at the evil in someone else, and never inward, at the one place it could be caught. That’s what the Christians called the Devil and the Buddhists called Mara. They weren’t describing a monster under the world. They were describing what this looks like when you see all of it at once.

Three things worth checking against rooms you’ve been in, because each one is what you’d expect from something with intentions and from nothing else.

It defends itself. Try naming it out loud while it’s happening—say, in the meeting, that this has stopped being about the problem. Watch what comes back. Not a rebuttal: a look, and *do you not see what we’re up against?* The one who hesitated is now the suspect.

It recruits. Every person who joins makes it cheaper for the next one. The first cruel line in a thread costs something to write. The fortieth costs nothing.

And it adapts. This is the strangest one, and Chapter 1 already showed it to you: bring attention to it and it doesn’t stop—it *intensifies*, in exactly the way needed to stay hidden. Ordinary bad behavior doesn’t do that. Ordinary bad behavior gets embarrassed.

I've been saying everyone reads this in everyone. What Chapter 1 showed is narrower: you read one imagined man, and the match held because you'd just done what he did. Call it recursive mutual recognition. I see it, I see that you see it, and neither of us can prove any of it, which is what lets it keep going. Whether it's universal, across every culture and every pair, I don't know and won't claim. A room needs only enough of it to fill the room. The appendix takes this apart properly.

Now: is the devil behind one hatred a different devil from the one behind another? There's a test. Watch what happens when two of them appear to go to war. Both grow. Every side comes out more certain that the problem lives in the other. That isn't a fight. That's a partnership. It doesn't care who you hate, as long as you hate. It never fights itself, because it's only ever on its own team, and all it needs to win is for you to use it as a tool for your noble cause. Whatever you call it, it has never once been on just one side of anything.

King said darkness cannot drive out darkness. Here's the reason. It was never trying to. Its whole purpose is to provoke the darkness in the other side.

Whether that's a creature or a pattern that behaves like one, I'll take up in section 13. It behaves identically either way.

I should say the obvious thing, because leaving it out would be its own kind of dishonesty: some conspiracies are real. People do meet in rooms and coordinate to do harm and hide it. What I'm describing is the one underneath: the one that supplies those rooms with people willing to sit in them, and supplies the rest of us with the certainty that we'd never be among them. Call it the root conspiracy. It doesn't compete with the others. It's what they grow out of.

That's also why the men in that locker room are so hard to think about clearly. Everything in you wants to write them off as what they appear to be. But what you're looking at is a trance. Nobody in it chose it, and none

of them can see out of it while they're in it. You know that from the inside, because you know what it's like to be in one and be certain you aren't.

And the darkest idea this thing has ever produced is the one that sounds most like a solution: if we could just round up the bad people and be rid of them, the rest of us would live in peace. The self-deception required to hold that thought guarantees the darkness stays behind, in full force, changed only in shape. I can't find an atrocity that didn't begin there.

When I say contempt is evil, I don't mean it as a value judgment. I mean it as an identification. This is the thing the word was always pointing at. You're in it. So am I.

Part C: Evil people

10. What they are

Evil is the *result* of turning away, not its cause. That's the claim. We all shield ourselves from someone's humanity a little, in order to cause them a little harm. Turn that all the way up—shield completely, so that no life is perceived in the other at all—and what's left is what I was dropped into in Chapter 2. It isn't a different thing. It's the same thing with the brakes gone. That's what it's like to *be* evil, and it doesn't feel evil. It feels like appetite. Like righteousness. Like the obvious thing to do.

The checkable version: bring up the worst thing you know of; something done to people who couldn't stop it. Now try to build it in your head without the part where whoever did it had stopped counting their victims as the same kind of creature as himself. You can't. Take that away and there's no version of the thing left standing. I've never found one that doesn't run on that move. Whether it can run on anything else is the question the sadist raises below, and I'll meet it there rather than here.

The book will trace that progression, because the gradient is what makes the claim checkable. The further in a person is, the less it feels like they're in anything. More harm, more knowledge of the harm, more shielding, and correspondingly *more* certainty. Take the "evil people" you've watched and check whether that pattern is there. Whether anyone is simply born without the faculty is a separate question, and I'll get to it below.

The far end

But there's something stranger at the far end, and it explains a thing about your own reaction that nothing else does.

The faculty you'd need in order to notice you've drifted is the same faculty you're drifting from. So the further gone someone is, the less access they have to it. That much is obvious. What isn't obvious is that the knowing itself doesn't shrink. It grows. More harm means more for it to register. So the deeply lost person is carrying *more* of it than you are, not less, and holding it down harder, with more of themselves committed to the holding.

Which means they know most and least at the same time, at maximum intensity. That is what deep limbo is.

Now ask what you're actually looking at when you look at such a person and feel that particular horror. You are not looking at an absence. An absence wouldn't produce that. You're looking at an enormous suppressed presence, a conscience under crushing load, showing through. That's the thing you're reading, and you read it accurately.

And here is the part that took me longest to see. It's the parasite that's showing it to you.

Think about what it needs. It survives by keeping its host turned away, and the host's conscience is the one thing that could end it. So it has to hold that conscience down, permanently, and holding it down takes something. What it uses is you. Your contempt arrives, presses down, and buys the parasite another day.

So it puts its host's conscience where you can see it. What you're reading, when you look at that person and feel that specific horror, is the parasite holding up the one thing in them that could kill it, so that you'll help hold it under.

We think we're looking at a monster showing us what it is. We're looking at a hostage being held up to the window.

The old line has it right, once you hear the word properly. Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle. Kind. Not nice.

Which is why "these are the people who need love the most" isn't sentiment and isn't softness. It's just the arithmetic. They're carrying the most, under the most pressure, with the least access to relief, and every instinct we have adds to the load.

The trap

And now the whole trap, in one piece, because this is where all of it closes.

You look at that person and you see something evil. **You're right.** It's there, you're reading it accurately, and it is exactly as bad as it feels.

You want it gone from the world. **You're right about that too.** That impulse is the best thing in you. It is not the problem.

And then you go after it. But you go after it from inside your own, because that's where you were standing the whole time, and what your own parasite does with that impulse is aim it at the person instead of the thing. Which is the one move that feeds what you're trying to destroy.

Every part of that is correct except the last step, and the last step is the only one you can't see.

That's the trap. Not that people are confused about what's good. We aren't. We know what's evil and we want it gone, and that accuracy is precisely what gets harvested.

The hostage

There's one more thing to say about the hostage, and it's the hardest part of the whole picture.

He isn't struggling. From where he sits there is nothing holding him.

I don't mean he's happy, or comfortable, or that his life is going well. I mean that the thing you're trying to free him from doesn't present itself to him as a captor. It presents itself as his judgment. His moral seriousness. The part of him that refuses to let bad things stand. Ask him to put it down and you are asking him to stop caring about what's wrong with the world. And it pays him. Every time he uses it there's a hit. That hot rightness, the satisfaction of pressing down on something that deserves it. You've had it too. It doesn't arrive as being ridden. It arrives as being *right*, more clearly than usual.

So this is the shape of it. From the outside, the thing looks monstrous, and you're not wrong. From the inside, the same thing feels like the best of you, and that isn't a trick you could catch by paying closer attention. It's what

it's like in there. And no one ever gets both views of the same instance. You have the inside of yours and the outside of everyone else's. So does everyone. So does he.

Which is why this is not a problem that people can solve for each other by explaining. Hand a man the outside view of himself and it arrives on the inside, where it lands as an attack on the thing he thinks is best in him. That is the first stranger, in one sentence, and it's why he made you worse. Whatever gets through has to get through without carrying a verdict. One thing does that, and you've met it, because it was done to you.

Two objections

Two objections belong here.

First: *some people know exactly what they're doing and enjoy it*. This is the case that could sink the book, so I'm going to state it at full strength and then say what would count as it winning.

The sadist needs the suffering to be real. Fake it and he loses interest. So he must be seeing a subject; there has to be someone in there for the pain to happen to. And Chapter 1 said harm needs the person out of view first. If he sees them and harms them anyway, wanting the harm, then the claim is false as stated.

So "in view" has to mean something more exact than "there's someone there." And it has to be checkable without looking at whether harm followed. Otherwise the claim only says that whoever harmed wasn't seeing, which says nothing. Here is what I mean by it. Three things, and you touched all three in the interlude, in the moment you actually saw somebody.

Their objection would land on you. You'd have to answer it, not manage it. Their hurt would register as bad, the way yours does. Not merely register, since the sadist needs it to register, but register *as bad*.

What's in them could change what you do next.

Each of these comes apart from harm. You can pass all three and still restrain someone, fight them, shoot back if you have to. That's the second stranger, and it's what section 12 will call fierce. You can fail all three and never lift a finger. That's the cold form from section 5, and most of the harm in the world runs on it. So here is the claim, stated so that it can lose. Harm doesn't require failing any of the three. Wanting the harm, as harm, requires failing at least one.

The sadist fails all three. Objection is part of the show. The hurt registers with its sign reversed; it arrives as appetite. And nothing in the victim has any standing to revise the plan. The attention is real and total, and it's the attention you give a dial.

I should say exactly how much the three checks prove, because a careful reader will push here. Somebody bent on revenge can answer: the objection landed and I judged it insufficient; the hurt registered as bad, and its badness is why I want it; something in him could have changed my mind and didn't. So the checks don't show that he sees nothing. What they show is narrower, and it's enough. Wanting suffering as suffering requires a failure of *equal standing*, even when the pain is vividly perceived. He can see a person and still not count that person as the same kind of thing as himself.

Now the part that's mine, which you should hold as inference. That failure is not an absence but limbo. The recognition that the other person is the same kind of thing as you is never gone. It's held down, and the deeper it's held, the less it looks like anything at all. In you, near the surface, you can catch it in a second. In him it's under so much that the only honest-sounding description is that it isn't there at all. That description is the core mistake, and it's the same mistake in both directions. It lets us call our own not-looking "unconscious" and his "evil," and both words say the same false thing: that it's fixed. What's in limbo was never the deed. It's the other person's sameness to you, and the deed is what holding that down makes possible. The far end I described above is this claim at full strength: what's held down doesn't shrink. It shows through.

So the test has to change, and it shouldn't rest on my reading of what's underneath. It can use the evidence the book has used since the street. If the contemptuous gaze is real evidence, and I've treated it as real from the first page, then the kind gaze is evidence of the same standing. So: at the moment somebody is inflicting suffering for its own sake, can they be seen looking at the victim with genuine kindness? Not instrumental harm, and not harm sincerely believed necessary; those aren't the test. Not "this hurts me more than you," which is coercion wearing tenderness. Not a flash of kindness and then the turning-away again, which is sequential. Not warm eye contact from somebody who has learned what it looks like. Real kindness, in the moment, while the suffering is being wanted for its own sake. If that exists, equal standing and the wish for suffering can coexist, and the account fails in a way that matters. I have never come across a case that meets those conditions.

Second, and this is a prediction rather than a proof: holding something down leaves a signature. It needs deniability. It tracks the target. It intensifies when exposed. It works on the verdict. I can't show from outside that nothing is held under, so this can't settle the question alone. But an appetite for suffering with none of that signature is either the place where this account stops, or a person in whom the faculty is missing rather than held down. I don't know which. That's the psychopath question, and it comes below.

What losing would cost me is less than it sounds, and you should know the size of the bet before you take my side of it.

Losing this would break my account of how harm gets done. It would not touch the part I most want you to have, because that part was never an account of anybody else. It's this. The desire to see somebody as a different kind of creature from you is not evidence of the move or a symptom of it. It is the move. And you don't need me, or any fact about sadists, to check it. You need to catch yourself in the moment the verdict settles, and notice that something in you is relieved by it.

What I can offer now is a prediction and one piece of testimony. The prediction: the sadist's pleasure depends on the failure. Put the same-kindness back, let it land on him that this is himself, and the pleasure doesn't survive it. You have the low-dose version already; it's what stopped you on the street. The testimony is Chapter 2. When I was dropped into the far end there was no perception at all of the life in the victims. And yet what was being devoured was innocence, and you cannot devour innocence without perceiving it. Subject in view, same-kind gone. That's the shape the hypothesis predicts, and it's the only instance I have from inside.

The deeper thing he isn't seeing, I think, is that they are him. That belongs to Part E, and I'll mark it as belief when we get there.

Second: *psychopaths*. I'll say here what I'll say there. I don't know. Some people may have very little of the faculty we've been calling conscience. Nothing in this book requires that everyone have it in equal measure. What it requires is that *you* have it, that most people do, and that the people you thought of in the Preface—the ones who made you truly enraged—are overwhelmingly not psychopaths. They're ordinary people in deep limbo. That's what the rage was reacting to. That's what it could see. The three checks at least make the question exact: which of them is off by default, and does it come on when asked. What little evidence there is says the second one can.

And I'll say what I can and can't prove. I can't prove that other people are, at their core, the thing I'll describe in section 14. What you can verify for yourself is that believing they aren't leads directly to contempt, and you've now seen what contempt does. My own stance is that it's simply the nature of consciousness. You don't have to take that. You only have to watch what the opposite belief produces.

All evil is innocent

And then the thing I hold at the center, which I'll state now and spend the rest of the book earning: **all evil is ultimately innocent.**

Not excusable. Not harmless. Innocent in a specific sense: the one committing it had to stop seeing something in order to do it, and nobody chooses to stop seeing while they can still see.

This is where most people slip, and I want to slow it down. You'll grant that they have a conscience, like you. Then you'll say: but they *want* to ignore it. Look at what that sentence does. If it's a want, it's a choice. If it's a choice, it's an evil choice. And now you need something in them that makes evil choices, and that is the "bad part" you just agreed they don't have, put back one level down. Nothing has been explained. The evil has just been given a new hiding place. The "want" is what not-seeing looks like from outside. From inside, there's never a moment where a person with a clear view of the harm decides to do it anyway. There's a moment where the view goes, then the reasons arrive, and then it feels like wanting. You cannot fathom the distortion a mind has to undergo to become someone who apparently chooses evil. If you saw all of it, your heart would break, and then break again. This isn't a plea for softness. Softness would make things worse, for them and for everyone. It's only that if you really saw it, the urge to shove them deeper could never again feel like anything but what it is.

There but for the grace of God. Not as a platitude. As a perception.

11. Contempt from below

I have to say this carefully, because it's the hardest thing in the book. When the Preface asked you to bring someone to mind, some of you didn't think of a stranger from the news. You thought of someone who hurt you. Or your child. Or your people.

Your rage is right. The fierceness is right. Stopping them is right, and if stopping them takes force, the force is right. Nothing here asks you to feel less, soften anything, or grant an inch you don't want to grant. None of that is on trial.

One thing is on trial: the verdict. *This is what they are.* And I'm going to ask you to look at one thing about that verdict. I'm asking because, of everyone, you've earned the right to know it.

Look at who benefits when you hold it.

When you've concluded that the one who hurt you is irredeemable, something in *them* is relieved. Not the person. The parasite in them, which needed you to see it that way. Your contempt is the evidence it runs on: *see, they're just what we said; this world is a war; the only thing that works is power.* You know this already, because you know what the first stranger's contempt did to you. It didn't make you better. It made you dig in. Now you're the stranger, and it doesn't matter that you're right about what they did.

That's the handshake again. Now the part I resisted longest. What fools you into believing that contempt-from-below is good—that it's the one clean contempt, the deserved one—is the same parasite that's running the person above you. Not a similar one. The same one. It doesn't care which direction contempt flows. It only needs it to flow. Every time it gets you to hold the verdict, it has recruited the person with the least reason to serve it. That's the tug from section 3, at its strongest, because here the perception is the most accurate it will ever be.

Of course you don't want to feed that. You, of all people.

What actually frightens it is the other thing: fierce, unyielding refusal that carries no verdict. That isn't a nice idea from a book. It's among the most effective forces in the history of people facing power they couldn't match. When King said hate was too great a burden to bear, he wasn't being sentimental; he was describing a strategy, and the record bears him out. It works because it's the second stranger. It gives the other side nothing to dig in against, and it gives the parasite in them nothing to eat. And it is enormously harder than contempt, which is why the parasite sells you contempt as the strong option.

Notice what the second stranger produced in you. It wasn't shame. It was remorse: what you feel about what you did when what you are isn't in question. Remorse repairs. Shame hides. That is the difference between the two strangers, and it has been measured.

There's one more form of contempt, the most common of all, and nobody talks about it: contempt for yourself. The verdict, turned inward. It feels like accountability. It produces what contempt always produces: hiding. The way you hold your own darkness is the way you'll end up holding theirs. If you can only look at what you did while what you are isn't on trial, that's true of them too. And it's true of you first.

Part D: The way through

12. The only lever

You've now seen why you can't trust the sureness: the parasite uses your reasoning, then your perception, and it's most convincing when it's most accurate about the darkness in someone else. So the question is the obvious one. If you can't trust your reasoning and you can't trust your seeing, what's left?

Only the thing that was demoted. And I have to tell you now what I think that is, because everything after this rests on it.

What's left

Take a person and remove, one at a time, everything they are hiding from themselves. Every story about why this was fine. Every reason that had to be manufactured. What's left is not a blank. It isn't neutrality, or a cleared ledger, or a person who now has to work out what to value from scratch.

What's left is care. For whoever is in front of them. For whatever is alive in the room. For the world. That's what I found under mine, and I'll describe it properly at the end, and I'm well aware that *love* is the kind of word that costs a book its credibility.

So don't take it from me. Take the piece of it you already ran. In Chapter 1 I asked you to go find a stranger and give them a dehumanizing look, and you couldn't do it. Look at what stopped you. Not a rule; you had no rule about strangers on the street. Not a decision that they deserved better; you didn't know them. You simply knew how it would land, because you know from the inside what it is to be them—and that knowing was, by itself, enough to make the thing impossible. Not distasteful. Impossible, unless you first supplied yourself with a reason.

That one experiment contains the whole argument, and you ran it on yourself. The reason has to come first, because the care is already there, and it is already strong enough to stop you. Which is also why the first stranger needed his story so badly, and why you needed limbo before you

could do the thing in the opening pages. Nobody builds machinery that elaborate to conceal something from a part of themselves that doesn't care. So the size of the hiding is a measurement of how much is being held down. However much you have had to hide from yourself over your life, that is at least how much of this is in you. Whether what's held down is care, and not only fear of being seen, is what the experiment on the street lets you check: nobody was watching.

It never went anywhere, either. It knew what it knew the whole time, and it still does. You don't build it and you don't earn it. You remember it. That's why the second stranger worked without making a single argument: he didn't put anything into you. He made it safe to remember.

What it implies

I know how that sounds. It's the oldest religious claim there is: that what you're looking for is already inside you, and inside everyone, and the only work is turning back toward it. I'm not going to ask you to take that on anyone's authority, least of all mine. I'm going to try to rest it on what you've already checked. But I'll tell you now what it implies, so you can hold me to it.

It implies that believing you don't have it—or that they don't—is not a neutral opinion. It is the drift itself. It's the one belief that pushes you deeper and keeps them where they are.

It implies that “let him who is without sin cast the first stone” isn't a counsel of mercy, and it isn't “don't judge.” It's a description of mechanism. Whoever is still caught will make things worse, however good the cause. And they'll never be told, because the evidence will agree with them.

And it implies that what the traditions called compassion was never the soft thing we've been taught to picture. Something needed us to picture it that way, so that we'd lose the ability to remember what it is. That's the last thing this book has to give back.

The lever

So: you can't fix people. What you can do is turn toward them, and you can only do that from turned-toward. I want to be careful here, because the strong version of this is false. Things done from a turned-away place sometimes work anyway. A contemptuous rebuke has shocked people into looking; it's happened to me. But anything that carries contempt is acting out the very thing it's trying to end, whether or not it gets the result it wanted. Turning toward is the one stance that doesn't.

One warning before another word about practice. If you take this book and go out to fix people with it, you will produce more of what it warns about, and you'll be certain you're helping. That's not a prediction about other readers. It's a report about me. The trap I fall into most is contempt for people who still have contempt. Watch for it. It's the same thing in new clothes.

What that leaves is your own turning-toward, and it's the only lever there is. Not because it's the noble option. Because it's the one thing in the picture that isn't already recruited.

And "turning toward" doesn't mean building something. The faculty is still there. It never left. This is also the thing Chapter 1 promised to come back to: turning away from yourself and turning away from your conscience are one act, because your conscience is the part of you that was doing the seeing. It isn't that you lose some separate part that was keeping watch. You lose the view itself. What the work amounts to is whatever lets you stop drowning it out, which is why the practices that do this are mostly practices of subtraction, and why the second stranger could do it with a look.

Which also settles a question you may have been holding since Chapter 1. If you can't decide to look, is any of this up to you? Yes, but not where you'd expect. The moment of not-seeing isn't chosen; by the time you could choose, the seeing is already gone. What is trainable is how fast you catch

it afterward. Days, then hours, then sometimes while it's still happening. That's the core of it, and it's the only part of this that improves with effort. Which is also where I stand, since I'm asking you to do this. I am not enlightened and I am not reliably turned toward. I feel contempt often—at the news, at people I love, at people who hold this same book badly. What I have is that I usually catch it now, sometimes in the moment and sometimes days later, and that catching it has stopped feeling like an accusation. That's the difference, and it's ongoing. If this book sounded like a report from someone finished, I've written it wrong.

The practice

A few more things about the practice.

Anger is natural, and often right. But it almost always carries a passenger: malice, contempt, self-righteousness. They feel healthy too. They aren't. Judgment, outrage, punishment: each of those words covers two different things. There's a contemptuous version and a non-contemptuous one. The contemptuous versions are always evil; that's the identification again, not a value judgment. The non-contemptuous versions are context-dependent. At one level the two versions are easy to confuse. At a deeper level the difference is obvious, and it's only the parasite that makes it feel hard.

It keeps them blurred on purpose. When somebody is caught doing the contemptuous kind, the reply is nearly always the same: *wait, are you saying I shouldn't correct bad behavior?* The question is fair, and the answer is no. Correct it, fiercely if you have to. What was on trial was never the correcting. It was the verdict, and the question quietly swaps one for the other. That swap is the door the parasite keeps propped open, and I make it too.

What I check, and what I'll ask you to check: does this need them to be bad? Would I feel *worse* if they got better? Is there anything in it I wouldn't want narrated out loud? Does it have to argue? Is there a hit of pleasure in what it wants to do to them that's separate from any good it would do? Any yes, and something has been turned away from.

And the one I can't argue you into, only hand you a place to check. Contempt for someone feeds the thing in them, including, and especially, when you have every reason for it. You watched the mechanism in Chapter 1: what lands on them isn't only the insult, it's a demonstration, by somebody who believes himself good, that the inner knowing can be overridden with a good enough excuse. So look at what your contempt has actually done to the people you've aimed it at, across years. Ask whether any of them got better.

You may be wondering by now whether the book is asking you to just *believe* people are good. It isn't. Deciding to believe someone is good, when you can't see it, is its own kind of not-looking, and people who are deep in will use it against you. Both overlooking the darkness and faking the light fail, in different ways. What the book is asking for is a skill: learning to see the turning-away in someone *as* turning-away—self-deception, not essence—and to see what's underneath it, for real. The deeper someone is in, the more skill it takes. Without that skill you cannot help but spread the parasite, because everything you do toward them will carry the verdict.

And here is the part that makes this a practice rather than a technique. You cannot see the parasite in someone else while you are hiding from it in yourself. Not won't—cannot. You'd have no idea what you were looking at. What lets you recognize it in another person is that you know it from the inside, the way you knew the stranger's limbo instantly because you'd been in it an hour earlier. The recognition isn't inference. It's the parasite in you recognizing itself over there. So the skill doesn't get built by studying other people. It gets built by whatever lets you stop turning away from your own, which is the same work, which is why there's no shortcut where you fix your seeing of them without touching yourself.

Two limits

Now the harder limit, and I've been putting it off. Seeing all the way into somebody who is far gone, seeing the whole of what sits under the damage, may be the work of a lifetime. I don't have it. The people I've met who seem

to have it spent decades on this. So if this book asked you to look at the worst person you know of and perceive their light, it would be asking for something neither of us can produce on demand, and you'd be left faking it, which fails.

It isn't asking that. It asks for the near end of the same skill, and the near end is available today. Catch yourself wanting them to be what you've decided they are. Notice, as the verdict settles, that something in you was after it. You don't have to see into him at all to do that. You only have to look at what happened in you, which is the one thing you're in a position to examine, and the one place where any of this can be reached.

One more limit, and it's a real one. This skill is not the same as knowing what to do. Compassion and wisdom are different skills, and there's an old line for what happens when you have one without the other: wisdom without compassion is ruthlessness, and compassion without wisdom is folly. You can be entirely clean of self-deception and still make a mess, and the mess is on you.

Trying to be a "good person" is itself the trap. "Good person" is an idea, and any idea of goodness generates "bad people" to define itself against. Whereas if I really see that what's in them is in me—that we're the same thing in different degrees of confusion—I don't have to try to be good. I just do the right thing, because the alternative isn't available anymore.

What I owe you

A few things I owe you. Cruelty *can* suppress misbehavior, at least the public kind, for a while, which is why it's so easy to believe it works. So check it against a case you have. Think of someone who was shamed into stopping something, in your family or your workplace or your own childhood. Did they stop, or did they get better at not being caught? And what happened to them afterward—did they become someone who does less harm, or someone with a grievance? Which is worse, stopping evil with contempt or quietly letting it win, can't be decided in the abstract. Sometimes stopping grave harm through contaminated means is plainly

better than permitting it. Sometimes the contempt used on a minor wrong is the greater harm. Outcomes still count. What this book adds is that the contempt is a second harm in the situation, and it has to be counted too. This is not a book about doing nothing. Any agenda, political or personal, can be carried out from connection or from contempt; people can feel which, and it changes everything downstream even when the words are identical. And none of this is “I read it, I got it.” There are levels, and then more levels. There are tools—the ones the contemplative traditions have been refining for millennia, and some newer ones—and the book will point at them without pretending to be them.

And one question I’ll leave with you: why *would* I want to stop corruption, when I feel so good judging it? Sit with that. The honest answer is that part of me doesn’t. That’s the part this book is about.

13. What it’s made of, and what you’re made of

Chapter 3 showed you the first two ways this hides: *I have no darkness*, and then *I have some, and I’m using it strategically against real evil*. Chapter 4 showed the third: the darkness convincing you it’s too horrible to face, so that you’ll keep it hidden, which is what spreads it. It shows you the second layer so that you’ll never suspect the third. You think you’re using it. It’s using you.

Here is what’s underneath all three, and it’s what I’ve been seeding since the Preface. Chapter 1 asked why he *needed* you to be bad. The full answer, in my own case: every bone in my body needed to believe that the problems of the world were caused by something alien to me. Then I could look at what my contempt had made of my enemies and know, with total certainty, that evil was real and that it wasn’t me. And underneath that need was not, finally, a wish to be superior. That’s its shape. Underneath was fear: of being the one who deserves what I’m dealing out; of what I’d find if I looked. Nobody is innocent for wanting to stand above someone. Everybody is innocent for being afraid. The need fed on my fear, my pride, my insecurity, and it never once felt like any of those. It felt like clarity.

So the fourth layer, the way out, is this. What you are is not the darkness. The darkness is nothing but the turning away—and now you can see why it *has* to be nothing but that. If what's underneath the hiding is care, as the stranger experiment showed, then nothing else is required to explain the harm. You don't need a second thing in there that wants it. You only need the caring to be out of view.

Now I have to say what that means the thing is made of. I want to slow down here, because what I'm about to say can be badly misheard, and the people most likely to mishear it are the ones with the most right to be angry with me.

Some of you have met this at full strength. Not the stranger in the street. Something that watched you, learned what you loved, and went for that. Something patient. Something that enjoyed it. If you've been in a room with that, you know it wasn't confusion and it wasn't a bad mood. It had an appetite, and the appetite had you in view.

If you haven't met it at that strength, you've met it at a lower one, and it's the same thing. Someone who was working you—a bully, a boss, an ex, a parent. You changed tactics and they changed with you. You closed one exit and they were already at the next one. That's the stranger from Chapter 1, and you read him in seconds. Nothing about the full-strength version is a different substance. It's the same thing with more of a person behind it.

I am not going to take that away from you. Everything you felt in that room was there. It tracked you, it adapted, it savored, it hid. Nothing I'm about to say subtracts a single degree of it.

Here it is anyway: I don't think there's a creature in there. Nothing requires that it be an agent. Everything requires that it function as one.

I've called it a dark part, and a parasite, and neither should be taken literally. It's like a parasite in that it lives off a host, and the host is you—your intelligence, your perception, your certainty, your sense of what real evil deserves. It has no supply of its own. It's *unlike* a parasite in that a

parasite is a living thing, and this isn't a thing at all. It's what's there where the light doesn't reach.

Now hear how little comfort that is.

Cold is nothing. Cold is the absence of heat—there's no such substance, no cold particles, nothing to point at. And cold kills more people than fire. Nobody freezing to death has ever been consoled by the physics. Drowning is the absence of air. A hole in a hull isn't a thing, and it takes the ship down with everyone aboard. Absences are not weaker than presences. Some of the worst things that can happen to a person are absences.

And this one is worse than those, for a reason that matters. Cold doesn't want anything. This does—or it does an impression of wanting so good that, from where you're standing, there's no difference. It aims. It waits. It reads you. It gets better at you the longer it works on you. All of that is real, and you felt all of it.

It doesn't supply any of it. *You* do, and so does the person it's operating through. It has his eyes, so it can watch you. It has his intelligence, so it can plan. It has his patience and his memory and his read on what you love. Take a whole human being's faculties, switch the caring off, and aim them: that's what you met. Something with every capacity a person has and none of the restraint. Which is why it looks *more* than human, not less. That's why every tradition drew it with a face. It was doing a face. It was wearing one.

And if it's a costume, you'd expect to recognize it on more than one person. Check whether you do. Two people, years apart, nothing in common—and the same thing looking out. Not a similar personality. The same flavor, the same weight, arriving with a sense of *oh, this again*. People say "he had that look" and nobody asks which look. For some readers that's a mild familiarity; for a few it's the most unsettling thing they've ever experienced. I don't know how common the strong version is. But if what you're recognizing were a property of individuals, there'd be nothing there to recognize twice.

So this is what you have to hold, and it takes both hands. It isn't real, and it has to be fought. Decide it's a real essence and you'll fight the person, which is contempt, and you've read what that does. Decide it's harmless because it's an absence and you'll do nothing while it eats, and you'll call your nothing compassion. Both hand it the win. What's true is stranger than either: a nothing that must be fought like a something, without ever being mistaken for a something.

And there's a payoff for holding it, which is the only reason it's worth the trouble. If it were a real essence, it would be in the person, and the only way to end it would be to end them. Because it isn't, there's another way in. You can go after the absence and leave the person standing. That's not a softer option. It's the one thing that has ever removed any of this from the world.

So there are two distinctions, and I'll lean on both. You and not-you: the darkness is not what you are. And real and not-real: the part that cares is the one thing in the picture with a light of its own. Everything the darkness seems to be, it is reflecting.

Which means there is nothing to be ashamed of at the bottom. And shame was its last line of defense. The moment you can look without your worth being on trial, it has nothing left to work with.

That's why the medicine could show me what it showed me. It held me in something while it did. When darkness is exposed without that, we feel threatened and can't look. Held, we can, and what we find is that it was never ours. That's what the second stranger did for you, in miniature. It's what this book is trying to do.

Part E: What I believe

The devil is none other than the will turned away from God. When the will turns from the One, it becomes its own devil. —Meister Eckhart

I've marked this part off, and I should say what the mark means, because the obvious reading is wrong. It doesn't mark a change of subject. Everything here is on the same road as everything before it, further along, and I got there by looking the way you looked in Chapter 1, for longer and with help. What it marks is that I can no longer give you a way to check what I'm saying. I can't take you there from here. Up to now every claim came with a way to check it, in your memory or on the street. From here the checks run out, and what's left is the road itself, which is practice, not pages. So the limit is on the book, not on you. If you look and don't find what I describe, that's a finding, the same as in the interlude, and it counts. Nothing practical in the book depends on this part, and Part F stands on its own.

14. What remains

In section 12 I said that what's left when the hiding is removed is care, and I derived it from the fact that you can't give a stranger that look without first talking yourself into it. That derivation gets you the existence of the thing. It doesn't get you its size, and its size is the part I can't derive.

What I found was not a quality I possess. It was not proportioned to me at all. Take away the pride and the shame and the fear—everything that had been doing the hiding—and what remained was not a better version of me. It was not a version of me. The traditions call it the Light, and every word I have for it is worse than that one. It isn't something you have. It's what's there when nothing is being turned away from.

Goodness is simply what remains in the absence of self-deception. Nothing has to be added.

You already know how to find it. Think again of the second stranger: the absence of a story, the cleanness, the sense that he was serving something

larger than himself and that you wanted to serve it too. Not because you calculated it. It was just obvious. Or think of the one person who saw the good in you when you couldn't see it yourself. That's what you can be for someone.

It is not nice. Kindness, in this sense, can be fierce. It can even be violent, if that's what a situation requires. Its only defining characteristic is that it's free of self-deception: it doesn't misperceive evil as intrinsic to anyone, and so it's incapable of contempt. It goes after the confusion, not the confused being. The Dalai Lama's version: if someone is trying to shoot you and you have a gun, shoot back. Just never out of malice. We've been taught to picture compassion as the soft option, the thing you do instead of fighting. That picture is one of the darkness's better pieces of work. It doesn't have to stop you from being compassionate. It only has to make sure that when you reach for the word, you find something limp, so that the real thing—fierce, clear, incapable of contempt—has no name left, and can't be remembered. This is what I said in section 12 the book has to give back. Not a new idea. The thing you were recognizing in the second stranger, and in whoever it was that once saw the good in you.

And just as the parasite in me handshakes with the parasite in you, so does this. When someone confronts you cleanly, something in you flickers in recognition, like being reminded it has a partner in a fight it thought it was fighting alone. You may stay enemies on the surface for a long time. Underneath, something else is happening.

I saw this from both sides in the experience I described in Chapter 2. I was shown myself drifting, further and further from the thing I'm describing, trusting the counterfeit more with every step. And I was shown how the people around me responded: most grew more contemptuous the further I went, as I'd done in their shoes. But a handful never did. They made it completely clear that what I was doing was unacceptable and that they'd stop it, and equally clear that they would not hand me over. They weren't refusing to let me misbehave. They were refusing to let the parasite have me. That's the difference the book is about.

Mine isn't the only account of this. A stranger on a forum, after a large dose, fixed on a news story about a child burned alive to clear land, and found what I found: "the same mistakes in value attribution, the same willful ignorance of the consequences of my acts and words. And there was nothing I could do to deny the similarity." I didn't write that, and I could have. It isn't evidence for anything in this book, only a second witness to the experience the book came from.

You have already had moments of this yourself. Moments you helped when nobody knew. Moments you confronted someone fiercely while seeing them as confused rather than evil. Moments you knew—not thought, *knew*—that something was right, and it cost you, and you did it anyway. Recall them, and notice whether they felt different from everything else.

15. What you are

Sections 6 and 9 stopped at what you can check: a group can be in one trance, and you can feel it from the doorway. I couldn't say there what I think that is. Here it is.

I'll start with what happened in the experience from Chapter 2, and I'll be careful to call it what it was: a perception, not a conclusion. What struck me hardest wasn't the darkness. It was that it fit together. My darkness and my enemy's weren't two things that happened to collide; they interlocked, as though made for each other, each move of mine supplying exactly what his needed. And it did not feel like a pattern I was noticing. It felt like being looked at. Like recognizing a face I'd seen before, and having the distinct sense that it had been recognized before, by other people, who had named it.

I can't give you that. Nothing in this book is harder to pass from one person to another, and anyone who tells you a perception like that counts as proof is doing what the book warns about. What I can point out is that every tradition that has looked hard at this ended up personifying it. Mara. Satan. The Accuser. That convergence is weak evidence at best, and

it's what you'd expect from human minds that see agents everywhere. I'm including it because the alternative—quietly presenting my metaphysics as an inference from the locker room—would be worse.

One absence

So here is the step past what the opening said. There, I told you that billions of parasites cooperate so well they behave like one thing. That's as far as you can check. What I actually think is that they aren't many things cooperating. They're one absence, showing up in many places.

That's less strange than it sounds. If there really were eight billion separate darknesses, a locker room falling into step would be a small miracle, and you'd expect it to take some doing. It takes none. And there's a plain reason: there's only one thing being turned away from. The same faculty is in every one of us; it's the one that recognized itself in the stranger's eyes. So there's only one way to turn away from it. Every shadow in a valley points away from the same sun. Nobody coordinates the shadows. They're one absence in many places, each cast by the same light, which is why they line up. That's the sense in which "the Devil" is one. And it's the sense in which the parasite is nothing: there is no creature. There's a hole where the light should reach, and it's the same hole everywhere.

One light

Which leads to the other half, about the light. There is one thing, looking at itself through countless eyes, pretending it isn't. When you look at "others," you are looking at yourself. The nondual traditions have said this for a very long time, and their argument is simpler than people expect: try to find anything that would tell two consciousnesses apart. Not two bodies, not two sets of memories—two *awarenesses*. There's nothing there to use. Everything you could point to is content, and awareness is what the content appears in. Two of them would have nothing in them to differ by, which is the same reason two turnings-away have nothing to differ by. I can't show you that this follows from anything above. I can tell you that you've tasted it: when you felt gratitude toward someone who helped strangers you'll

never meet, or gave to something that could never benefit you. When a story about being every person who ever lived landed somewhere real.

One piece of evidence

One piece of evidence, with its objection attached. Roy Baumeister took single incidents and collected two accounts of each: one from the person who did it, one from the person it was done to. The accounts differ in the same directions every time—how long it went on, who provoked whom, how bad it was. In ordinary people, not liars. Both are honestly reporting a world, and the worlds don't match. The objection: Baumeister could only show that because there was a fact of the matter to check against, so there is a shared world, and I won't pretend otherwise. What I think is narrower. There's a shared world and there is no shared *seeing* of it, and we act as though the second follows from the first—so anyone who reports seeing differently must be lying or defective. That assumption is what turns a difference in seeing into a verdict about a person. Most of what we call irreconcilable is that.

And I think this is also what conscience is. It's why you know something is wrong without being able to say what's wrong, and why the knowing never budged when you argued with it. The turning-away leaks into the world because you are the world, and it has nowhere else to go. That's why calling it "unconscious"—tucking it away, out of the universe's sight—never quite convinced you. There's nowhere to tuck it. The world can see it because you can see it, because you *are* it. In the experience from Chapter 2, the idea that I could hide anything at all was seen to be ridiculous. So why bother trying?

Where the fear comes from

This is where the fear from section 13 comes from. The whole thing begins with a fear that makes no sense: the fear of having left what you are. Of having separated from God, Love, the Source—whatever you want to call it. Having lost apparent contact with absolute goodness, you go looking for it in the relative, which in practice means finding someone worse than you.

Contempt is the search for your own goodness in the wrong place. That's why it never satisfies and always needs one more. The clearest statement of this I've found is Kenneth Wapnick's reading of *A Course in Miracles*: the ego is nothing but the belief in separation, and its one strategy is to keep the guilt "out there." I got here by a different road. I'll say where the roads meet.

What follows

If any of that is true, a few things follow, and they're the things that decide how you live.

You cannot pull a fast one over the world, because you are the world. Every act of hiding is itself what darkens it. Exploiting nature cannot work, however cleverly it's done, because we are nature. Not as a metaphor. And this is where the question from section 8 lands: whether the not-looking goes all the way down to how we see matter. I think it does. We see reality as a lifeless collection of stuff over which we hold dominion—resources, objects, purposeless matter following meaningless laws—and that is the cold form of turning-away applied to everything at once. Contempt for a person and contempt for all of it are not received as different things by the part of us that receives them. I can't verify that for you. I can only tell you that from where I stood, they were the same act.

The sharpest form of the claim, the one that makes it metaphysics rather than sociology, is a sealed room. Nobody watching, nobody ever told, no consequences of any kind. You crush an insect, not by accident, but for the small pleasure of it. On any account where this spreads by being witnessed and copied, nothing happened.

I don't think nothing happened. I think it propagates anyway—not through a channel I'm failing to name, but because there is nowhere for it to go that isn't already you and already everything. That is unfalsifiable and I'm marking it as mine. What I'll say for it is that you have a reaction to the sealed room, and the reaction isn't neutral. We've all done the version nobody saw. It didn't feel like nothing, and the explanation that it *should*

have felt like nothing has never once convinced the part of you that was there.

Everything you do makes a difference, through networks of cause your conscious mind can't trace, nudging things toward remembering or toward forgetting. This is why what you do when nobody is watching doesn't fail to matter. Your private integrity bolsters the resolve of strangers you'll never meet, at the moment they're about to break. I can't prove that. I'm reporting it as the thing that, if it's true, makes it worth staying committed to your light at literally any cost. Not to your *idea* of the light, which is always contaminated. To the thing itself.

That's also the definition of good I'll be working with: whatever brings us closer to remembering what we are. Evil is whatever pushes us further from it. Which is why the greatest gift you can give the world is your own seeing. Until then, some part of you is reinforcing what you're fighting. That's not a moral failing. It's just how it works.

16. The tree and the arch

Section 8 asked you to look at a living thing as inventory and notice what you had to stop doing. I want to push that one step further, and I'm putting it here, in the part marked belief, because the step goes past anything you can check. The check itself you can run, and I'll try to make it a real one.

Somebody cuts down a tree that has stood for a thousand years, for fun, with no timber wanted and no land to clear. For the pleasure of it. Notice what you feel. It arrives the way the corpse case arrived in section 3: fast, wordless, immovable, and with no victim you could name. The tree has no conscience. Whatever you're registering, it isn't that it could have objected.

Now take the life out entirely. Somebody takes a hammer to the Delicate Arch, the stone span in Utah, and brings it down for the pleasure of watching it fall. People would be livid. Ask them why and you'll get a story: other people won't get to see it now. The feeling arrived before the story.

The timing doesn't prove what I'd like it to. Rarity, beauty, and the loss to everyone who'd have stood under it may be part of what the feeling is made of, and those register fast, before any words, without being afterthoughts. And the hammer gives you a man to react to; some of what you feel may be about him. So vary it, and watch what changes. The arch falls on its own one night, nobody's fault. Less? Different? Now a formation just as beautiful that nobody has ever seen, in a canyon nobody will ever enter, and you're the one with the hammer, and no one will ever know. Now you learn afterward that the one you saw smashed was a replica and the real arch is fine. Notice which of these leaves the feeling intact and which drains it. If it survives the empty canyon, it isn't about other people's enjoyment. If it fades with the natural collapse and returns with the hammer, some of it is about the hand. Run them all. I'm not going to tell you what you found. Here is what I found, and it's the step I can't hand you. The violation lands in exactly the place where the violation of a person lands. Up to now I've described the faculty as recognizing life, another center of experience with the same standing as mine, and that is its nearest and plainest form. What I believe is that at its deepest, it recognizes that reality is not other than whatever is looking at it, and that the arch, which has no experience of its own, is on this view not outside the thing that's looking either. Contempt for the world is the same act as contempt for a person, aimed at everything at once. That's why section 8 could ask you to check it on the living world with no metaphysics, and why this section can't. From where I stood in the experience in Chapter 2, they were one act. What I can give you is the arch, and the variations. Run them, and notice that you didn't need my metaphysics to feel any of it. You only need it if you found what I found.

Part F

17. One idea, four sides

Everything in this book has been one idea from different sides, and I'd rather say so than have you assemble it yourself. Here it is with the sides named.

There is one move. Turning away from what you know, and from the person in front of you. It's a single act, not two: you can't do the second without the first.

Everything we call wrongdoing is made of it. Not accompanied by it. Made of it. Take the turning away out and there's nothing left over that was the wrong part.

Contempt is that move in its purest form. Which is why this book is named for it.

So the only thing that doesn't feed the trap is turning toward. Yours, first. Things done from turned-away sometimes help. What they can't do is stop enacting the relation they're aimed at ending.

The first and third you saw in Chapter 1 and the interlude. The second I've argued through Parts A to C, and the sadist in section 10 is where it could still fail. The fourth is what Part D exists to earn, and whether it earned it is yours to say, not mine.

Hold onto what it does to the vocabulary. If that's right, then turning toward and turning away aren't just related to right and wrong, help and harm, good and evil. They're what those words have been pointing at the whole time. Section 9 made that identification about the hardest word. This is the rest of it.

18. What this book is for

The mutual knowing in the first stranger's gaze was known on both sides and said by neither. That's what let it work. Say it aloud, in public, and

the pretense fails. Not because anyone learns anything new, but because now everyone can see that everyone sees.

That's the bet this book is making. If it becomes ordinary, sayable knowledge that contempt is the thing—that this is what we've been calling evil—then contempt loses its cover. A thing that can be named can't do work that depended on being unnameable.

I should be honest about the limit. The word “contempt” already exists, and its existence hasn't dissolved anything. What's unnameable isn't the word. It's the act itself, in the moment it's happening, named by the person it's happening to, in a way the other person can't wave off. That takes a shared understanding of what the act is, and that's what I'm trying to give you. And I'll predict something else: this idea will be used as a weapon. Someone will accuse someone of “doing the thing,” with contempt. When that happens, it will carry the same tell it always has. You'll know.

Nothing here asks you to soften what you see or pretend the harm isn't real. If anything you'll see more, and more clearly. The only thing being taken from you is the pleasure of certainty about what someone *is*. And I think, if you check, you'll find that it was never yours to begin with.

And under the bet is the thing the bet is for. The name is a means. Go back to what you found on the street. You couldn't give a stranger that look while you were looking at him, and nothing you'd decided or been taught was stopping you. Something already there was. Everything since has been an account of how much work it takes to hide from that something, and what the hiding does to the world. Take the hiding away, in yourself, and what's left is what stopped you. It was never a quality you had. It was what was doing the looking.

I can't take you further than suspecting that. If you come away suspecting it, from your own case, the book did its work, whatever else it got wrong.

When it is recognized, it is dissolved.