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LEVEL: 9

[Chapter 2]

The Problem of Evil, Demons, and Moral Monsters

[URL: Evil]

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Nothing human is strange to me.

— Terence [Publius Terentius Afer, c.190 - c.159 B.C.E.]

“There have been so much talk about people in a place like Auschwitz and the way they acted there. ... / People acted very different in the camp, some in a cowardly and selfish way, some bravely and beautifully—there was no rule. No. But such a terrible place was this Auschwitz, Stingo, terrible beyond all belief, that you really could not say that this person *should* have done a certain thing in a fine or noble fashion, as in the other world. If he or she done a noble thing, then you could admire them like any place else, but the Nazis were murderers and when they were not murdering they turned people into sick animals, so if what the people done was not so noble, or even was like animals, then you have to understand it, hating it maybe but pitying it at the same time, because you knew how easy it was for you to act like an animal too.”

— William Styron (1979) *Sophie's Choice*, pp.310-311.

Yet even as... I ruminated on Bilbo's fate [U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo, D-Miss, a notorious, outspoken racist], I was overtaken by another emotion; I

suppose it might be called regret.... I knew something about Bilbo—something more, that is, than was known by the ordinary American citizen with even a / marginal concern with politics.... [B]ut even in the superficiality of my understanding I felt there had been revealed to me facets of Bilbo’s character that gave the heft of flesh and the stink of real sweat to that shingle-flat cartoon of the daily press. What I knew about Bilbo was not even particularly redeeming—he would remain a first-class scoundrel until [his death]—but it had at least allowed me to perceive human bones and dimensions through the papier-mâché stock villain from Dixie.

— William Styron (1979) *Sophie’s Choice*, pp.205-206.

I Introduction

If empathy is indeed automatic and constitutes the ontology of morality, then morality itself is automatic and social relations are easy. Morality consists of people all empathizing with each other, so interpersonal conflicts are merely temporary failures of empathy and greater empathy can address (and, in the long run and in general, can effectively resolve) those conflicts. No one is a demon or monster, and so while we limited, imperfect people may make mistakes, even terrible mistakes, there is no “Evil”.

If Evil exists, however, this rosy view is unjustified.¹ Empathy no longer solves problems, and treating Evil people as if they had some human emotion, as if one could have a human connection with them, is futile and even dangerous. The rest of this book uses the assumption of empathy in numerous ways, so if this assumption were false, most of my analyses would be only an ivory-tower idealism. I must therefore deal with the issue of evil’s existence, and I do so as follows. I first define Evil in Section 2. I must do this in a way that matches ordinary usage, or at least ordinary usage as clarified by the definition and the ways of relating perspective within which

¹Note the similarity of this issue to the theological “problem of pain”, which asks how a loving and all-powerful God can permit a world in which creatures suffer pain in times and circumstances that appear arbitrary and accidental. Both problems connect to the question of the meaning of life. (Thornton Wilder [19xx] shows this connection in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.)

it is embedded. Section 3 argues that we are all in the uncomfortable position of being unable to prove either the existence or the nonexistence of Evil. In explaining why we are in that position, I describe the variety of ways in which the allegation of Evil can be undercut. None of these is guaranteed to work, so there is always the possibility that we will find a case of Evil. However, as Section 4 argues, even if one fails to find humanity where Evil is alleged, this does not prove that Evil exists, since one may succeed in the future.

This uncertainty of Evil's existence calls into question how we are to act in real life. With which of these two positions are we to approach the world? And how are we to choose between them – on the basis of unsupported faith alone? In Section 5 I argue that there is another option, one taken by the WoRP. This option does not ask of us to believe in either position, since such belief can have only a metaphysical grounding. I argue that in real life we therefore need to act in recognition of this undecidability. Concretely, this means continuing dialogue even if we find ourselves forced to act despite our uncertainty. Section 6 argues that our tendency seems to be to err on the side of premature closure if inquiry.

Section 7 presents a case study of the analysis of apparent Evil, showing in a concrete way how the real exploration of an apparent Evil might reveal its origins in ordinary human behavior, behavior we can understand as humans even while seeing it as wrong. In the final section (§8) I argue that our culture (mis)understands moral discourse as a civil trial where one side or the other has to pay damages, instead of a discourse where both sides are transformed. And so this leads into the subsequent essay's discussion of what is meant by the attitude of "sharing a moral universe".

II Defining Evil

So what do I mean when by “Evil”? I must define the term consonant with its ordinary language meaning, because we both want to be sure that we are talking about the same thing, that I’m not solving my problems by defining them away. So in this work, “Evil” is defined as follows:

Someone is said to be Evil, or at least Evil within a certain domain of social interaction, if s/he acts with the *primary* intention of preventing another’s attempt to achieve some or all aspects of the other’s Good.

Note the following about this definition:

- Evil is a noun or, if an adjective, one that characterizes an entity having the capacity of empathy and thus of moral choice. It makes no difference to me how we label actions – call them evil, bad, immoral, wicked, iniquitous, or whatever; my only concern is whether people possess the quality of being inherently Evil in a way that affects how they relate to others. To make evident that there are two different meanings, I will capitalize the word when it refers to the abstract concept of “Evil” (“Lucifer is the Prince of Evil”) and when it is used to characterize the inherent nature of a moral agent(s) (“Osama bin Laden is an Evil man”). I will not capitalize it when it refers to acts, as in, “Attacking the World Trade Center was an evil thing to do”. Acts are not Good or Evil in themselves, only after being morally situated.
- The definition refers to harm to another being the *primary* intention of one’s action, i.e., an end in itself, not a means to achieving one’s own sense of the Good. So if I smite the heathen because I want (say) to achieve the reign of my True

religion, not *solely* because I enjoy depriving them of life, then I am not Evil, even though the heathen might say I am. Or if I smite them because I feel bad and mistakenly believe that their pain will make me feel better, then in this circumstance too I am not Evil. Notice that this is a different concept from the morality of my action. Even if I do immoral things, that does not in itself make me Evil, because I might be doing those things out of confusion, or an inability to see the other's point of view, etc.

So:

- If a tiger kills and eats me, it is not Evil, because it does not act with the primary intention of harming me but rather with the intention of eating, protecting its territory, defending its cubs, etc.
- A parent who spans a child is not Evil, because s/he does so with the intention of corrections / instructing the child, not for the pleasure of making the child hurt.²
- Lucifer (as popularly imagined) is Evil, because s/he acts with the sole intention of creating pain, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual.

III The Difficulty of Proving Evil Exists

With this definition of Evil in hand, we can turn to the question of whether anyone is in fact Evil. My argument is that we are existentially incapable of deciding whether Evil exists, either as a realized abstraction or in a specific case. I argue that the label of "Evil" is, rather, a way of ending discourse, a way of avoiding a real recognition of the other as a moral agent, even though one has

²The parent is doing a wrong, I believe, but is not Evil.

not pushed recognition as far as possible. I make the analogy to the practice of science. It is always possible, when encountering an unfamiliar / not-understood phenomenon, to postulate that reality is not, in the end, knowable. Even if someone then finds a reasonable explanation for the phenomenon, that does not disprove the postulate: the theories we currently hold might be (and might even be shown to be) false, and even if they are not, it could still be the case that reality will ultimately be unknowable.

This unfalsifiability should make us leery of the postulate, but it isn't a decisive objection, because the opposite postulate is also unfalsifiable. If we postulate that reality *is* ultimately knowable, no empirical evidence can disprove it. Even if we currently lack an understanding of some phenomenon, this does not prove that we will not be able to reach an understanding in the future.

Given that both postulates are unprovable, why do we choose the latter? Why, even facing a phenomenon we can make no sense of, even (say) facing a long history of bafflement at that phenomenon, do we continue to study it? The answer seems to be that the history of human understanding (including science) shows a fairly steady stream of successes, while the assumption that reality is unknowable stops us before we begin. "Stop trying" doesn't seem to be a very useful injunction, even if its formal validity remains unaffected by our successes.³ Human experience so far has been that reality yields its secrets, and that the effort to solve so-far-baffling problems is far less than the advantages we have gained from our successes.

The parallel to morality should be obvious. If the postulate that Evil exists is to be more

³If the postulate is to have any real content, then it must state at some point that we ought to stop trying to understand *here*. If it doesn't do that, then it is simply a metaphysical belief.

than unfounded faith, then it has to dictate that at some point, for some people, we should stop and say that they are Evil, that no further attempts at clarification or empathic understanding can possibly succeed. But it seems to me that our experience is that mutual understanding and empathic connection have shown a steady stream of successes. Even if we find some people hard to understand, we don't know in advance who they are, and our successes in empathy seem well worth the so-far-not-successful attempts.⁴ So the discussion that follows basically lays out all the ways in which ordinary human behavior can be mistakenly termed Evil.

A. Origins within the Other of Behavior Taken to Show S/He Is Evil

My sense of Evil starts with the empirical observation that others do things that block my pursuit of my Goods – say, my spouse spends the rent money on something s/he alone wants (*not* a real experience of mine!) – or that even actively harm me – say, someone spreads bad rumors about me among my colleagues. I defer until later the issue of whether “harm” can be objectively defined, but some behavior certainly seems bad from any remotely calm perspective. For example, about a year ago as I write this, a father was tried for murder because he took his screaming baby and smashed it against a wall in anger. That seems like an undeniably bad thing.

⁴I am arguing from human history, because that seems to be the only real evidence we have. I am not aware of any good arguments for asserting the existence of Evil (as opposed to metaphysical, unprovable ones or ones based on contingent sources like sacred scriptures). And our historical experience seems to show us case after case where what was thought to be Evil became understood later in a quite different light. We no longer believe that the people burned in Salem were Evil but were rather the victims of fear, hysteria, mob thinking, and patriarchal relations – and perhaps what we would now term mental illness. We look at what in earlier times might be termed demonic possession and recognize what today we would think of as [dissociative identity disorder](#). Pick someone designated as Evil long enough ago that tempers have cooled, and we find them much more understandable. Maybe mistaken, maybe not – but not Evil.

So to undercut the assertion that the father was Evil, I have to consider directly how such behavior could come to be. In the subsequent discussion my criterion is whether one's doing these things would make one an Evil person. I'd hope that would be your criterion as well. As Terence wrote – given as the epigraph above –, “Nothing human is strange to me.” If I can see how something could reasonably happen to lead one to do wrong, then the father remains human – maybe doing bad things, maybe self-centered, maybe badly mistaken or confused or ignorant, maybe blinded by emotions, but not a demon or monster.

I have argued in this chapter that morality is grounded in empathy. Morality is, ontologically, my response to situations seen with the eyes of empathy, reason, and authenticity. I need empathy to grasp and respect the other's sense of the Good.⁵ I need reason to bring this chaos of conflicting empathies into some sort of order. I need authenticity so that my response fully comprehends *all* senses of the Good; I need authenticity so as to give each sense of the Good, both mine and the other's, its due weight. A failure of any of these three “eyes” can result in immoral behavior. I therefore take up each such problem in turn.

1: Inability to Empathize / Role-take

- Inability to empathize
- The development of moral reasoning

⁵And the Right and the True, of course, not simply the Good. As Habermas notes (19xx), all three sets of beliefs always underlie our communicative acts and, I would extend this to, our understandings of situations generally. Being more concerned with social interaction and intentionality, this work does not focus on the True very much, but it should be taken as implicit in the argument.

- Inauthenticity⁶

2: *Inability to empathize*

Some people seem unable to empathize. I don't mean that they show a willed selfishness but rather, more primitively, that they seem to be neurologically damaged. I'm thinking here of schizophrenia, autism, psychosis, sociopathology, dementia and so on – pathologies that seem to come from a failure of the body rather than the spirit. It is for these people that we have the plea of “not guilty by reason of insanity”, since they seem truly unable to form a sense of right and wrong in the first place or to understand how to differentiate the two. Such people are not Evil; they're just damaged. We may restrain them in institutions, for their own protection as well as ours, but we don't judge them as moral agents.⁷ Alzheimer's disease provides a clear example. In many cases, the progression of the disease includes a period in which the person is angry and even violent. I hope that if I were to become subject to that, people would call me ill, not Evil.

I'm also talking about Harry Harlow's (19xx) famous experiments with monkeys, where he seemed to show that certain forms of stimulation were necessary for brain development and – more relevant to my argument here – that if this stimulation were not provided during a critical

⁶Inauthenticity is not the same as lack of sincerity. One can be sincere (or at least not insincere) if one has not integrated all of one's personas, since one persona can speak sincerely and yet be replaced at any moment by another persona. For the same reason, inauthenticity is also not the same as instrumental action.

⁷At any rate, there are *some* spheres in which we don't judge them. I don't know enough about the brain – and probably psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurophysiologists don't either – to give all the configurations of sanity and insanity by which the human flesh can be afflicted.

growth time, then the brain development it caused could not be made up later. This problem has been mentioned in connection with the extremes of wealth and poverty in our society – namely, that a large group of children may not be getting critical needs met at critical times in their development, leaving us with a serious, long-term problem of dealing with a large group of people neurologically incapable of moral thought.

We may certainly dispute whether the situation is really so bleak – whether there really is a critical period for empathy, moral thought, or anything related. But I need not defend the extreme position. All I really want to point out is that bad behavior can arise from a neurological failure instead of a moral one. We would not call such people Evil, however horrible their behavior. Evil seems to require a free choice to do wrong, and “free choice” seems inapplicable to neurophysiological damage.

3: The development of moral reasoning

Xx to the effect that cognition is required to bring the disparate personas into a coherent relationship. Not to mention the knowledge of what other people experience in situations. No one is to blame if people make mistakes then.

4: Inauthenticity

Related to the above, certain people can't reconcile the voices inside themselves, let alone those of others. Distress patterns occur when there's too much internal yelling to hear anyone else (or, more precisely, to understand sufficiently and give due weight to their senses of the Good). However, I believe that inside every distress pattern there's a human

trying to get out.⁸ Both alternatives (that there is and there isn't such a human inside) are unprovable, so I pick the more interesting alternative. Kind of like cave exploring in the Central Kentucky Cave System: one may not have found one's way into big cave yet, but one keeps exploring, even pushing tiny possibilities, because one never knows.

5: Acting on inaccurate information

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6: Overwhelmed and acting without thought

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7: Not grasping all ramifications of the situation

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The Agreement Problem vs. the Necessity of Judgment

Sometimes people reach an impasse and must act. This is the agreement problem.

However, this doesn't mean, "Do anything" or "You can't be held accountable" or "Just refuse to change your mind and what you do is o.k."

This looks like Evil, because the other is taking action even after having talked to you.

⁸The movie, "Castaway", seems to be a metaphor for this. The spirit as isolated, unable to connect. Other people giving up on him. His never giving up. The possibility that he can die in his attempt to escape – maybe through nothing more than his being (through no fault of his own) in a bad spot in the first place; maybe through his being unlucky; maybe through desperation making him desperate to escape even if prematurely; maybe through his dying of old age before the craft can be completed and the weather looks promising. The turmoil that surrounds his reemergence. (Other people no longer know how to relate to him; ditto him to them.)

B. Origins within Oneself of False Perceptions of Evil

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C. Are We Excusing the Inexcusable?

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IV The Difficulty of Proving Evil Does Not Exist

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V The WoRP's Approach: Leaving Evil's Existence Undecidable

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VI The Assumption of Evil, and Premature Closure of Inquiry

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It seems to me important in moral discourse to distinguish between people's rational and irrational interests. We don't want to make our moral theory subject to every transient feeling, to every transient need someone might claim.

A. Empathy vs. Revenge As a Response to Bad Behavior

[Say how revenge is a natural reaction to someone else's behavior. "They did X because they didn't empathize with me, so X can be done to them to bring it home." Dick Hudelson said Kant justified the death penalty for murderers because in murdering, the murderer had given up his right to claim respect for his person. However, all that such a murder shows is that the murder accepts murdering in the circumstances as he sees them. He isn't saying that it's all right to execute him, because the circumstances are different. ("I killed her because she was cheating on me. It's o.k. to kill people who are cheating on one. You can't apply this principle to justify killing me, because I'm not cheating on you.") So the question is really whether the principle being applied is moral; we can't just claim he has given up his rights.⁹

B. Empathy vs. Praise and Blame As Responses to "Virtuous" and "Evil" Behavior

Lawrence Kohlberg used to say that praise and blame are not moral categories, i.e., categories of moral judgments. I don't have a specific reference for his contention right now, but I agree with it. I see it as coming from the nature of deontological vs. aretaic judgments. Praise and blame are aretaic judgments, that is, judgments of the moral worth of people. One can make judgments about duty, obligation, responsibility, etc. – but since we have no idea what led to any failure of such duty/obligation/etc., we have no grounds for judging the people involved. I think when we

⁹This is like Rawls said about jealousy. People might feel it, but it wasn't morally relevant. In a passage I can't locate now, Seyla Benhabib says that she might want to take into consideration the fact that someone feels hurt, or jealous, etc. If I feel envious, for example, I don't think it helps me (or anyone else) much to have that feeling catered to; I would prefer a society in which such feelings could be discharged. I think Rawls is right that envy is not a sentiment deserving of moral respect.

say “praise”, we mean “are happy with”, and when we say “blame”, we mean “are angry at”. And just leave it at that. Praise and blame are attempts to moralize people into doing what we want. Happiness and anger are at least authentic, so they maintain the human connection. What is gained by dressing these up as “praise” or “blame”?

I will even press this further. It seems to me that we need to distinguish between happiness at someone and simply being happy with the state of affairs. If our Sense of the Good is being satisfied, we are happy. Even as mild a statement as “I’m happy with you” says that I regard you as responsible for my happiness. Ditto with anger, which says you are the cause of and are responsible for my feeling bad. The correct orientation, I believe, is that of Fisher et al.’s (1991:xx) aphorism: “The people are not the problem; the problem is the problem.” The problem is that we can’t seem to find a way to get our needs satisfied simultaneously, not that either of us is responsible for the results of that fact.

[...] Take another example: suppose that early experiences of praise and blame created in someone a frozen need for praise -- that is, a desire for praise that could never be satisfied by any amount of praise. The correct tack to take here, it seems to me, is not to cater to this unsatisfiable need but to have the person cry it away. (Here I’m thinking of a specific counseling technique where one has the person repeat a phrase like, “I never got the praise I deserved”.)

VII Case Study: The Mugger in “Law and Order”

This example seeks to show how there is a grain of moral truth in everyone, which we must acknowledge. It is taken from a very small incident in one episode of “Law and Order”. (The incident has no relevance to the main plot.)¹⁰ The scene opens on Detective Lenny Briscoe (as I recall) interrogating a young man (I’ll call him “Bob” here – Robert the robber –, and substitute his real name if/when I learn it) who has been arrested for killing someone in the course of a robbery. Bob is very agitated at the injustice being done him, saying something along the lines of, “It’s not my fault! All I wanted was his watch! Why didn’t he just give the watch to me? It’s really his fault he got killed.” Detective Briscoe, not batting an eyelash, asks him “Why don’t you write that all down in your statement and sign it. I know the prosecutor will be very interested in it.” At which point Briscoe is called away to pursue the main plot line of the episode, leaving Bob presumably to write and sign his own death warrant (at least metaphorically and perhaps, in the

¹⁰A member of a “Law & Order” fan website (“Xavier”: rjccproperty@caribe.net) wrote me to say that the episode was first shown on April 30, 1997 (7th season, Episode 154, “We Like Mike”, written by Gardner Stern & I. C. Rapoport, directed by David Platt). However, someone else said it was Episode 153, and I haven’t been able to verify either account.

I mention this to indicate that I want to give credit where it is due. But for the specific purpose of this section, the important thing is what I give as the incident, regardless of when it aired or even whether I have recalled it correctly.

Casey Siemaszko [Shuman], Stuart Burney [Joostens], Ron Frazier [Judge Aldo Iannello], Benny Nieves [Ricky Garcia], Reiko Aylesworth [Tiffany Sherman], Fernando Lopez [Tony Garcia], John Doman [Sergeant Frank Gottlieb], Frank John Hughes [Mike Bodack], Sam Reni [Jack], Ronald Weyand [Father Dimitius], Santo Fazio [Miles], Henry Yuk [Lao], Patricia Mauceri [Virginia Watts], Marty Grabstein [Ackerman], Steven Goldstein [Rabbi Kornstein], Gina Pearlman [Ruth Gottlieb], Richard Ziman [Dr. Marienthal], Paul O'Brien [Bronx ADA Polk], James Reno [Lt. Brosnan], Glenn Wein [Pharmacist], Phil Harrison [Stan], Frannie Handman [Gertrude], Michelle Hurst [Public Defender], Robert Montano [CSU Technician], Joseph Roccobene [Policeman], Penelope Willis [Nurse], Fran Reiter [Jury Forewoman], Gaetano Lisi [Technician], Marcell Rosenblatt [Court Reporter]

end, in reality), Bob being too simple to understand the situation. Bob is clearly pretty unintelligent in general and quite undeveloped morally.¹¹

I expect that most viewers' first reaction was something like, "Hardy-har-har! Isn't it amazing how stupid some people can be? Wasn't that clever of Lenny to trick this scumbag into confessing all?" Maybe the writers intended no more than that obvious level of response, but there is also a second level, and I like to think that the writers intended this as well: a level arising from our feeling both a bit sorry for Bob – sorry for him having to make his way in a world he is clearly unable to comprehend – and a bit ashamed of Lenny for taking advantage of Bob's ignorance and stupidity. It is this second level of analysis/response that I want to discuss here, because I think there are ramifications to it that are only hinted at by the emotion of feeling sorry.

In my view, Bob ... [etc. to the effect that Bob has a sense of the Good that is not taken into consideration at all; our attention is all on the (morally wrong, obviously) means by which he pursues it.] [Cite Sean Gonsalves's 19xx column somewhere in here.]

VIII Reducing Moral Discourse to a Civil Trial

[xx Maybe the section title should go on to read, "": Having Winners & Losers vs. Having Mutual Responsibility in a Shared Moral Universe".]

First: The assumption that Evil exists is unfounded, and it usually is a means of perpetuating oppression.

¹¹In Kohlberg's scale of moral reasoning development, he is still at Stage 1, a reasoning level that, Kohlberg's studies show, most U.S. citizens grow out of before they're ten years old.

Second: In U.S. political culture we seem to see moral issues in terms of a civil trial, i.e., as a balance of rights or a balance of torts, where one side wins and the other loses. In a civil trial, both sides say to the other, “You screwed me; you didn’t take my interests into account.” At the trial’s conclusion, one side is made to pay damages to the other and/or promise to take the other’s interests into account. Nothing is asked of the other side. (This issue is discussed more fully in the [essay on mediation and litigation](#) in Chapter 6.)

But there is another possible view of the situation, a view seeing moral issues in terms of discourse, where all parties recognize, correlatively, both the other as a fellow member of a moral universe and one’s own responsibility for taking that into account. If we truly saw each other as fellow members of a moral universe, then we would all be concerned all the time to understand the other’s position and interests.¹²

¹²I see this most obviously now, after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Progressives are attempting to point out that we have failed (and continue to fail) to understand the other’s perspective – which really means that of the Muslim world, not simply that of Osama bin Laden and the suicide terrorists. However, the popular response to this critique reduces it from “We have moral responsibilities also” to “We don’t have to pay any attention to their perspective, because they did worse than we did”. The debate then takes the form of “dueling oppressions”: who has suffered the greatest wrong? Certainly we always face the tactical, practical question of what oppressions need our immediate and/or greatest attention, but in the clamor for this attention, we are pushed into claiming that one oppression is inherently more important than another. The only reliable stance is that *all* oppressions are important, that *all* oppressions need correcting. The fact that we might choose to concentrate on one more than another is an occasion for sorrow in solidarity, not for the discounting of others’ claims as unworthy of attention.

The problem, then, is that discourse becomes not something we all do but rather a right to do the talking, to make the other listen. Something similar is seen when people argue that we should not talk to Bin Laden (or the Afghans, etc.), because then we would be rewarding them for their attack. In the ways of relating perspective, however, discourse is something everyone does all the time with everyone else. Our talking to Bin Laden looks like a reward only because we regard it as a reward and have stopped talking. If we were talking all the time to everyone, then these terrorist attacks would be seen clearly as a violent break with a human relationship instead of, as many could take them to be, the only response left in dealing with an enemy who won’t

Works to read that bear on this:

○ xx

GRAND CENTRAL STATION: EXPRESS TRAINS DEPARTING FOR...

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