

What Is Evil?

Theological & Philosophical Investigations

Thursdays, 2:00 - 3:30pm (- Oct 12)

frederickuu.org/fcc

Covenant

- Use **“I” statements**: *Speak from your own experience.*
- **Ask permission before sharing** other participants’ stories outside the group.
- **Lean-in/back**: be conscious of the level of participation that you bring to the conversation. Allow everyone a chance to speak before you speak again.
- You always have **permission to “pass.”**



Check-in

- Name
- “Why did you sign-up for this class?”



Outline

1. September 7: Why Study Evil?
2. September 14: Postmodernism & Evil
3. September 21: Evil & Theodicy/Freedom
4. September 28: Evil & Conscience/Intention
5. October 5: Evil as Sickness; “Us & Them: Evil as Distance”
6. October 12: Personal Definitions of Evil & Commitments (~500 words?)

Do we know evil when we encounter it?

- ✦ “Villains” of history [*who decides?*]
- ✦ Routine brutality in the news
- ✦ Nihilistic violence of sociopaths.

Investigate from a 21st-century, postmodern perspective

- ✦ What is evil?
- ✦ Why does evil exist in history?
- ✦ Why does evil exist in the human heart?
- ✦ How we might best respond individually & collectively?

Course Objectives

- ✦ Reflect on the relevance of **classical** definitions of evil, including theodicies
- ✦ Consider **modern** and **postmodern** perspective of what “evil” means today
- ✦ Reflect on the roles of **freedom**, **conscience**, and **intention** in regard to evil
- ✦ Better understand the ways that **distance** (“us & them”) impacts perceptions of evil
- ✦ Discern how we might best **respond** to evil
- ✦ Construct **personal definition** of evil



NEWS ITEM: THERE ARE NOW 46.2 MILLION AMERICANS LIVING IN POVERTY



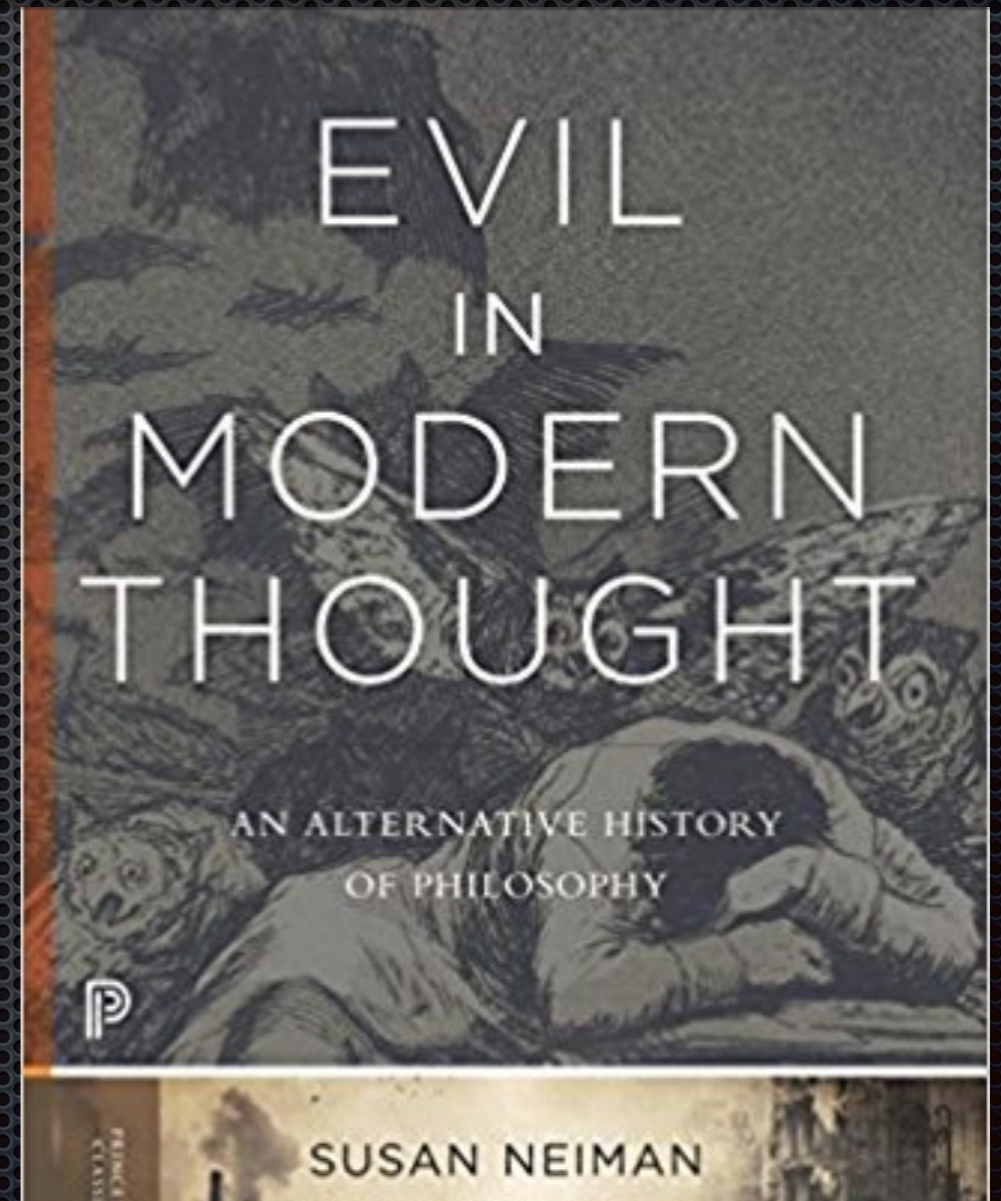
**NO PAIN,
NO GAIN!**

**U.S. WORKER
OVERWORKED,
UNDERPAID,
DOWNSIZED,
OUTSOURCED**

**YOU MAYBE OUT
OF WORK, BUT THE
SYSTEM WORKS!**



- ✦ “Doestoevski underlined the idea that evil is not just one more mystery.
- ✦ It is so central to our lives that if reason stumbles there, it must give way to faith.
- ✦ **If you cannot understand why children are tortured, nothing else you understand really matters.”**





I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one.

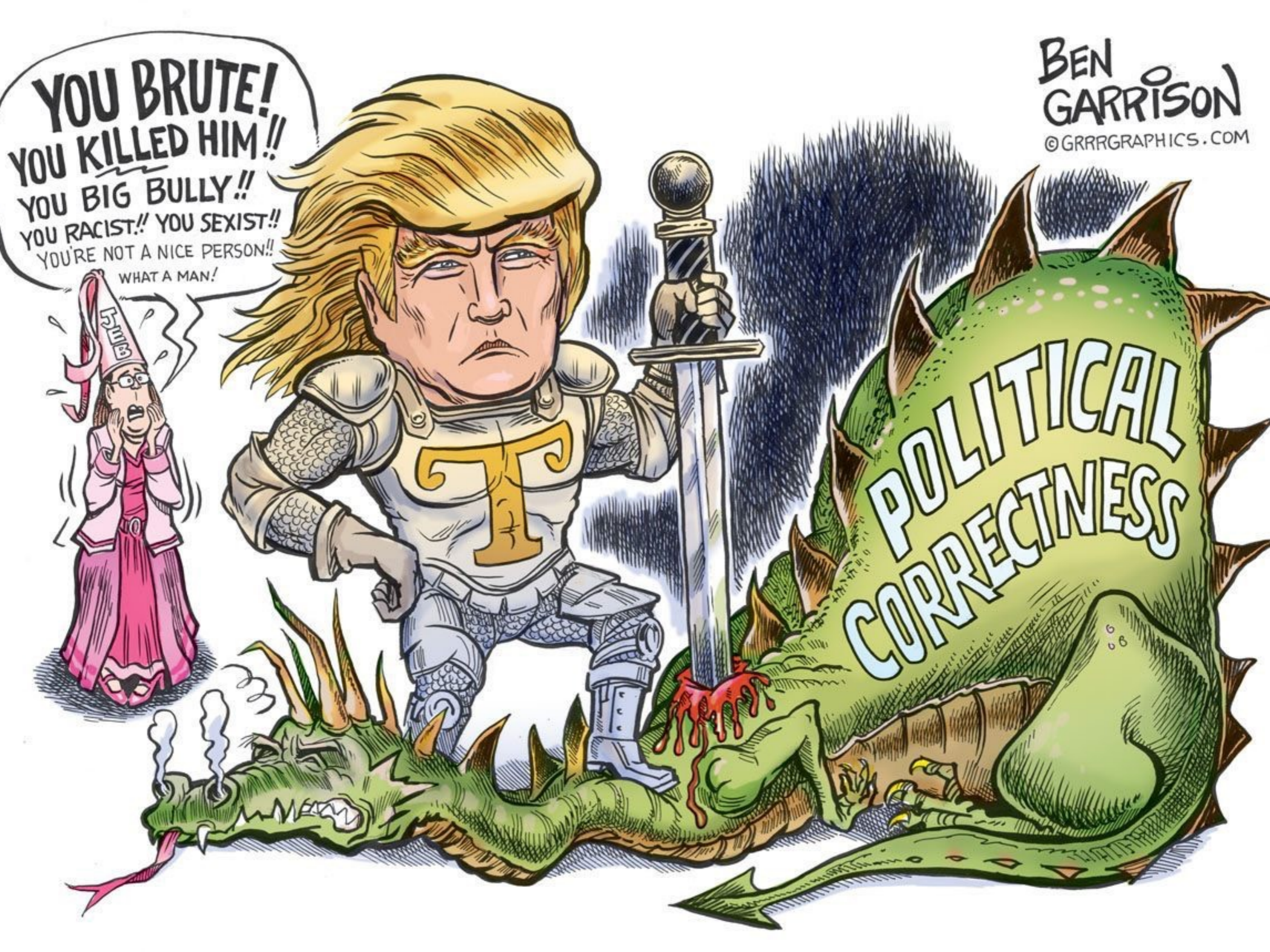
— *Mother Teresa* —

AZ QUOTES





YOU BRUTE!
YOU KILLED HIM!!
YOU BIG BULLY!!
YOU RACIST!! YOU SEXIST!!
YOU'RE NOT A NICE PERSON!!
WHAT A MAN!

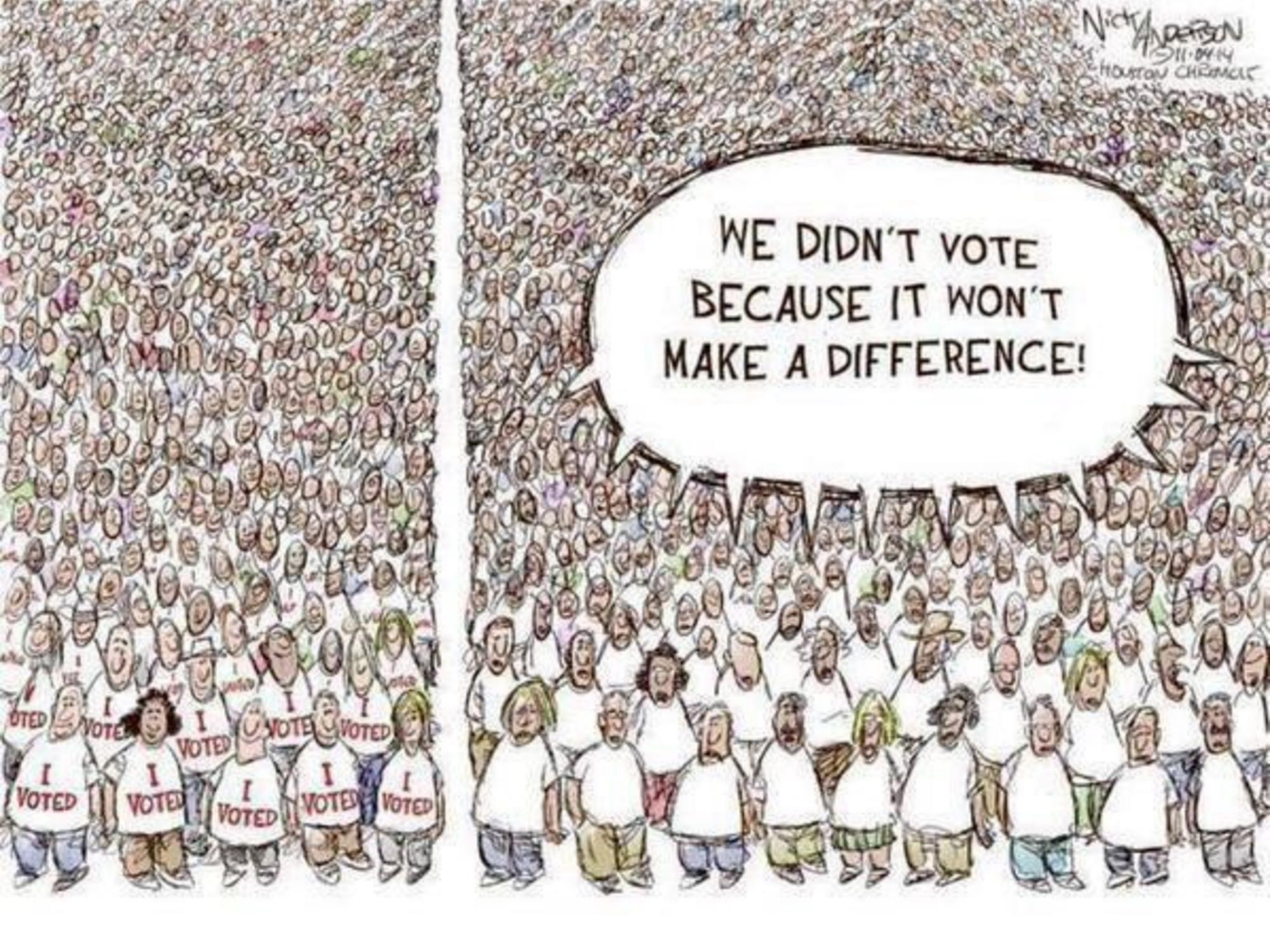


**CHOOSING BETWEEN THE
LESSER OF TWO EVILS?**



**HOW IS CHOOSING EVIL
WORKING OUT FOR YOU?**

NICK ANDERSON
11-04-14
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

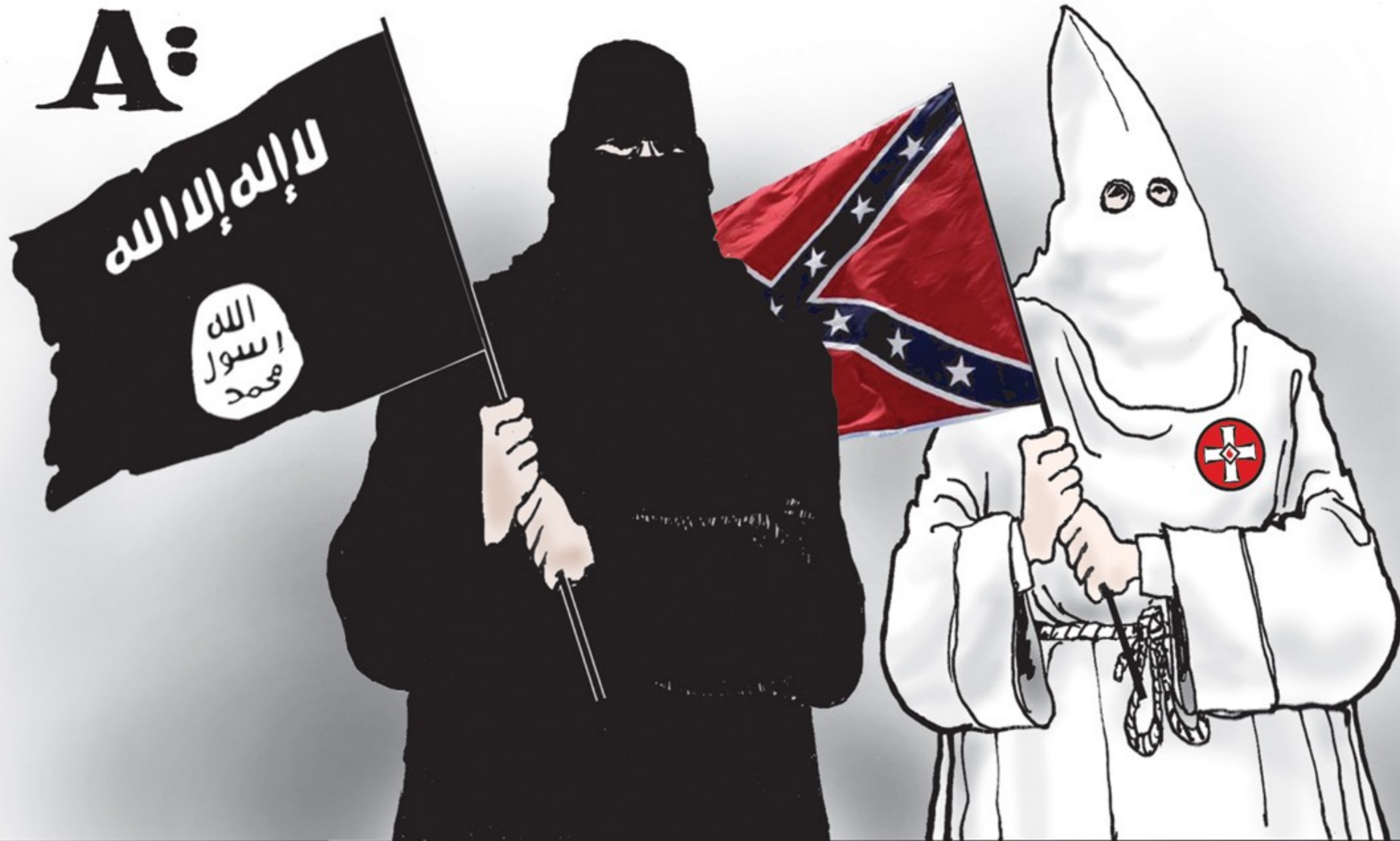


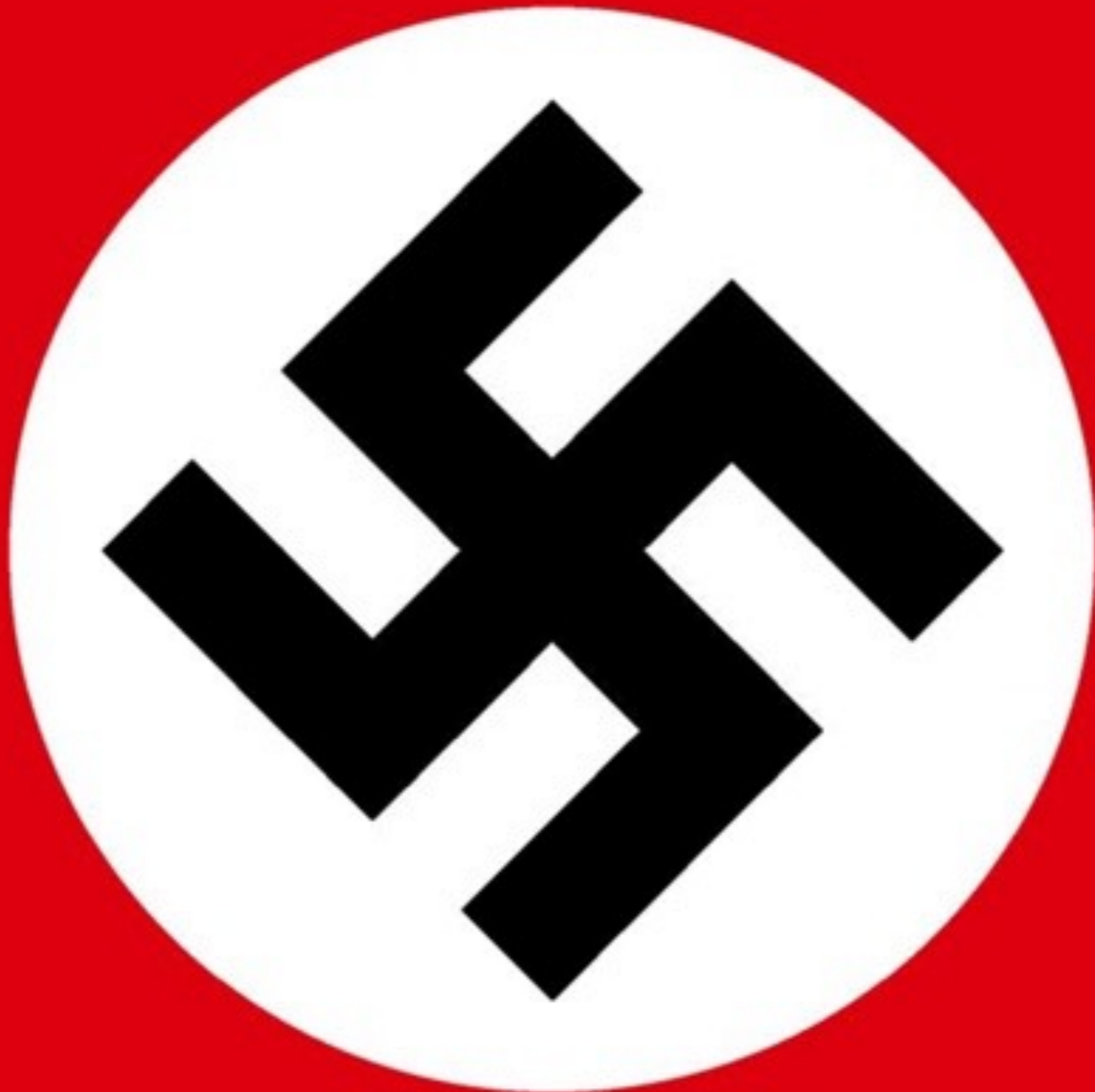
WE DIDN'T VOTE
BECAUSE IT WON'T
MAKE A DIFFERENCE!



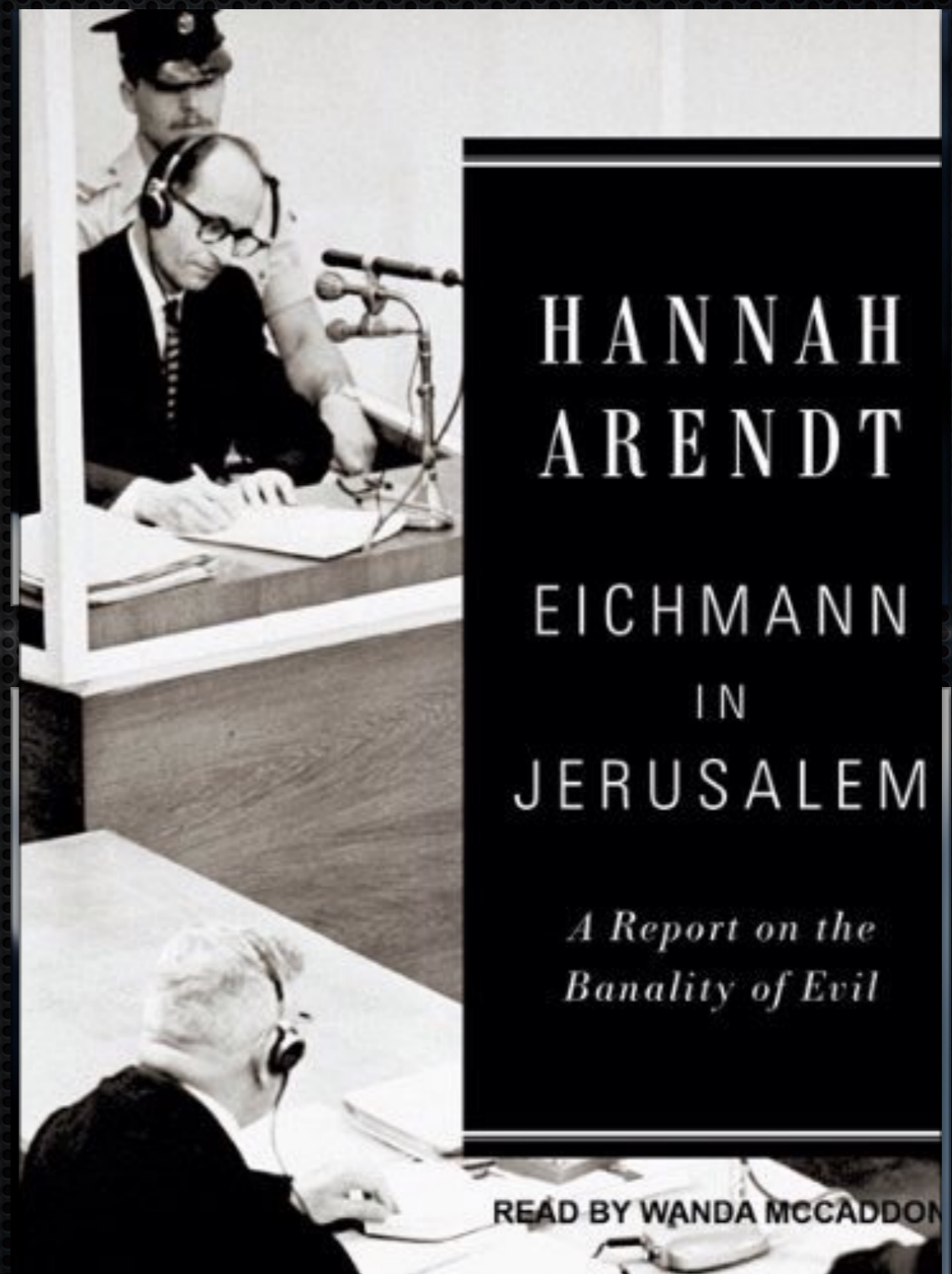
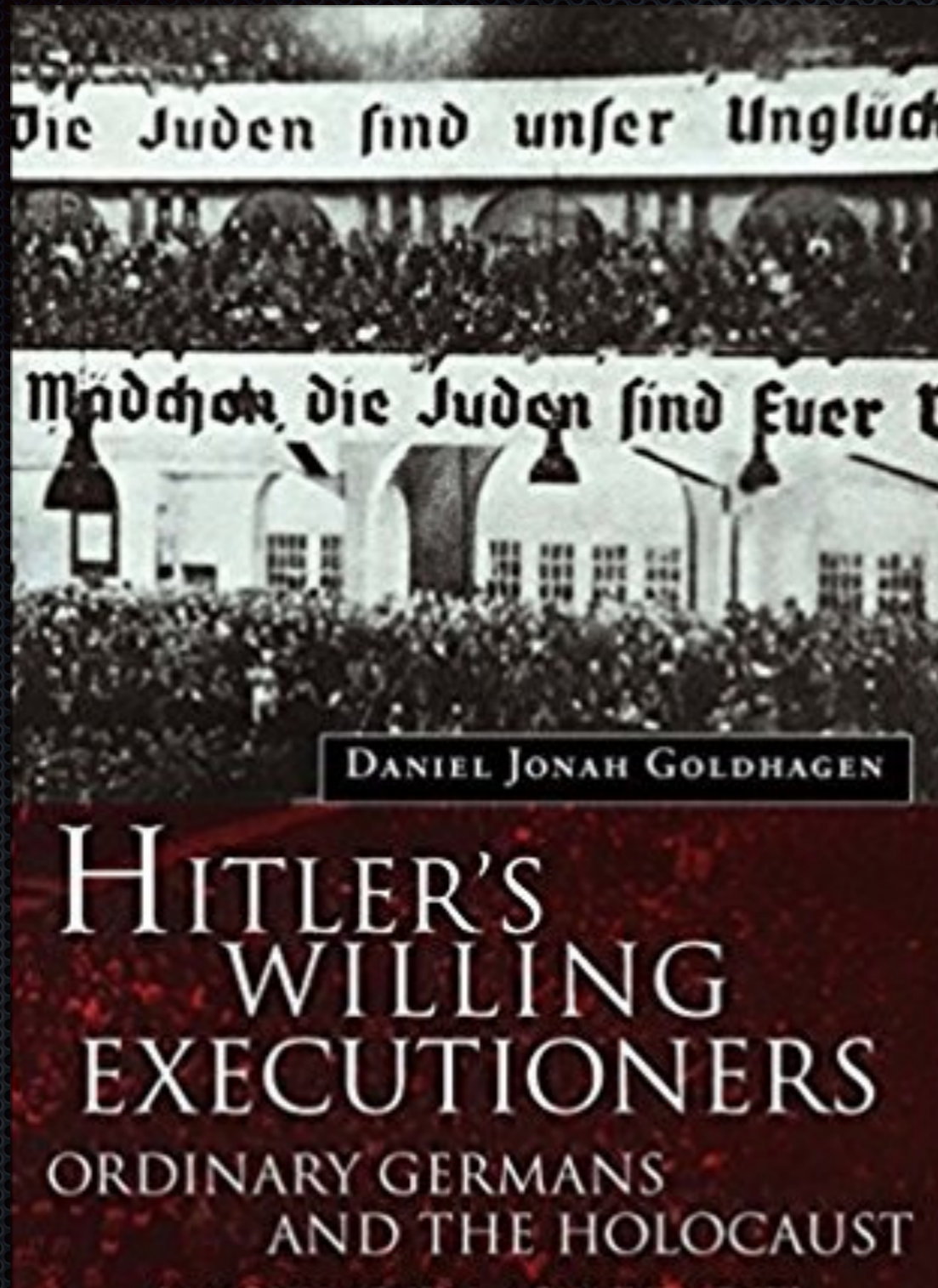
Q: WHAT TWO TERRORIST GROUPS, CLAIMING to be RELIGIOUS, WEAR MASKS to DO THEIR EVIL ACTS ?

A:





Authority & Conscience



“Unjust law is no law at all.” *[who decides?]*

Simone Weil

- ✦ “Evil
- ✦ when we are in its power is
- ✦ not felt as evil
- ✦ but as a necessity, or even a duty.”



Right Turn • Opinion

Ending DACA would be Trump's most evil act

By Jennifer Rubin September 4 at 9:45 AM



President Trump is expected to phase out Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, with a six month delay. The Obama-era program grants two-year work permits to those brought into the country illegally as children. (Jenny Starrs/The Washington Post)

Woe to those who call
evil good,
and good evil...

(Isaiah 5:20)

GOOGLE



**60%
GOOD**



**40%
EVIL**

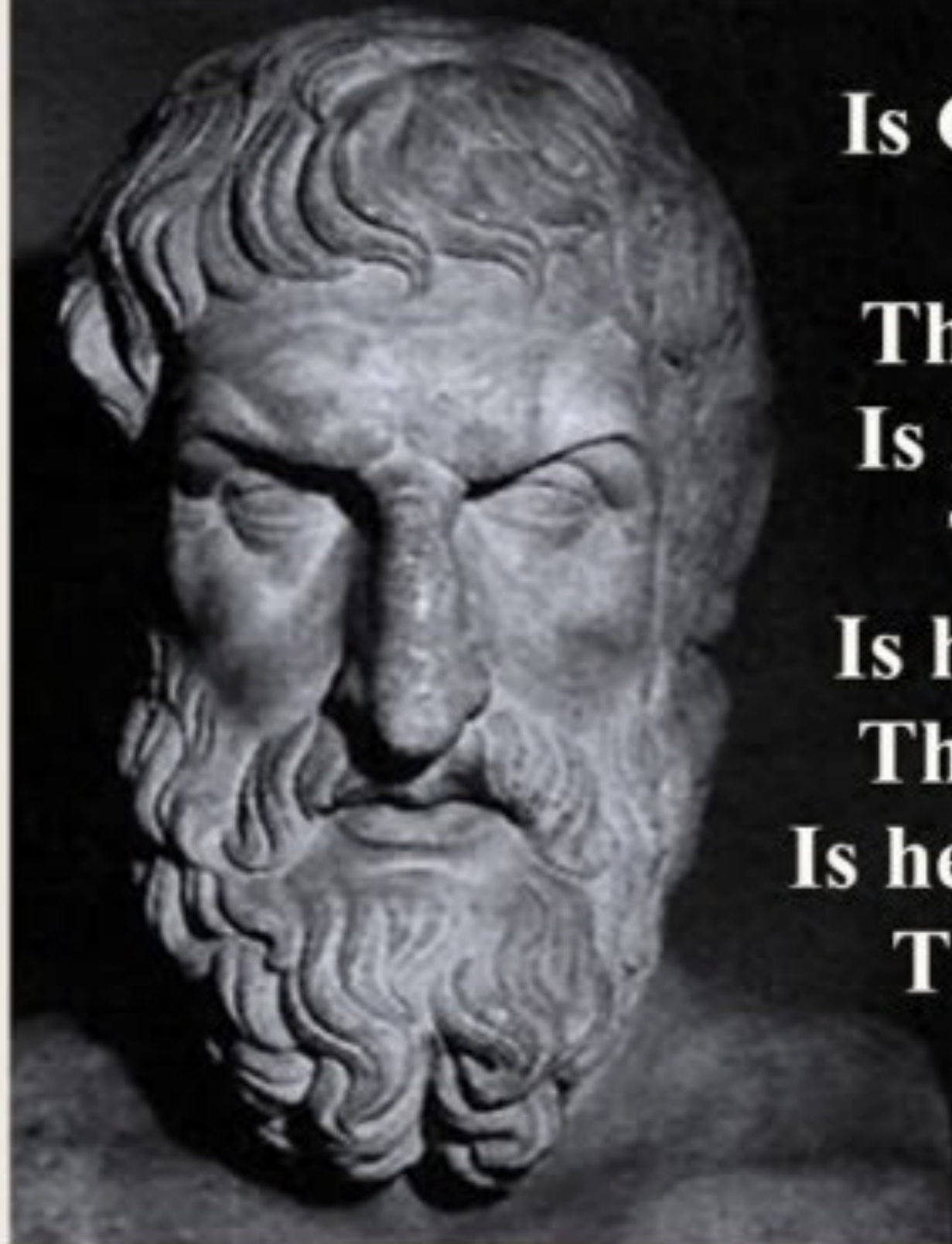




GOOD OR EVIL

Who Decides?





**Is God willing to prevent evil,
but not able?**

Then he is not omnipotent

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

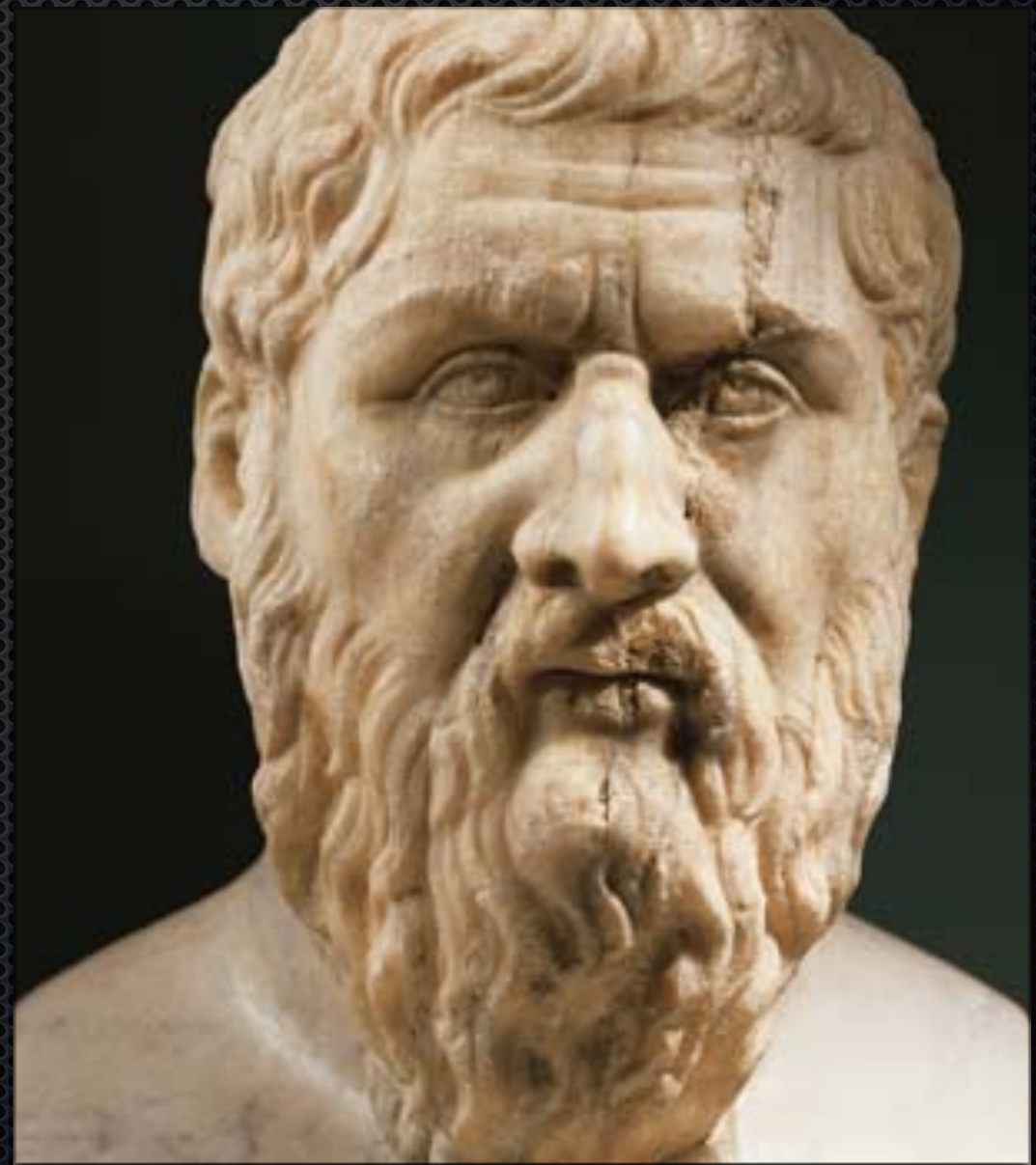
Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

Epicurus

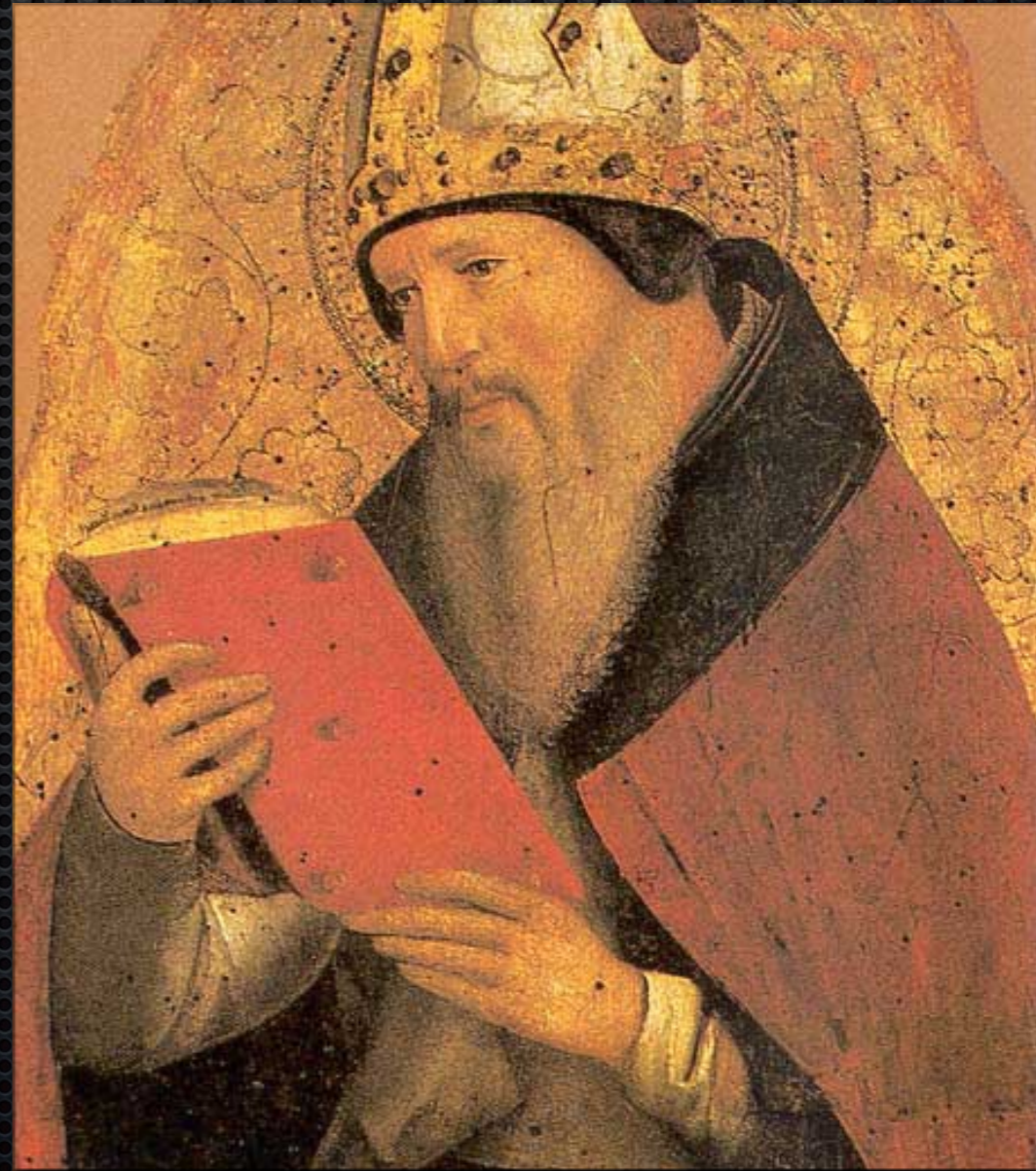
Plato (428-427 BCE)

- “Evils... can never pass away; for there must always remain something which is antagonistic to good.
- Having no place among the Gods in heaven, of necessity they hover around the earthly nature and this mortal sphere.
- Wherefore we ought to fly away from earth to heaven as quickly as we can; and to fly away is to become like God, as far as this is possible; and to become like Him is to become holy and just and wise.”



Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)

- ✦ “For when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—
- ✦ not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked.”
- ✦ “Free-will was the cause of our doing ill.”
- ✦ “Perversion of the will, turned aside from...God [to lesser things].”



Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE)

- “Good signifies ‘perfect being’
- Evil signifies nothing else than ‘privation of perfect being.’
- “A thing is called evil if it *lacks a perfection* it ought to have.
- If a man lacks the sense of sight, this is an evil for him. But the same lack is not an evil for a stone, for the stone is not equipped by nature to have the faculty of sight.”



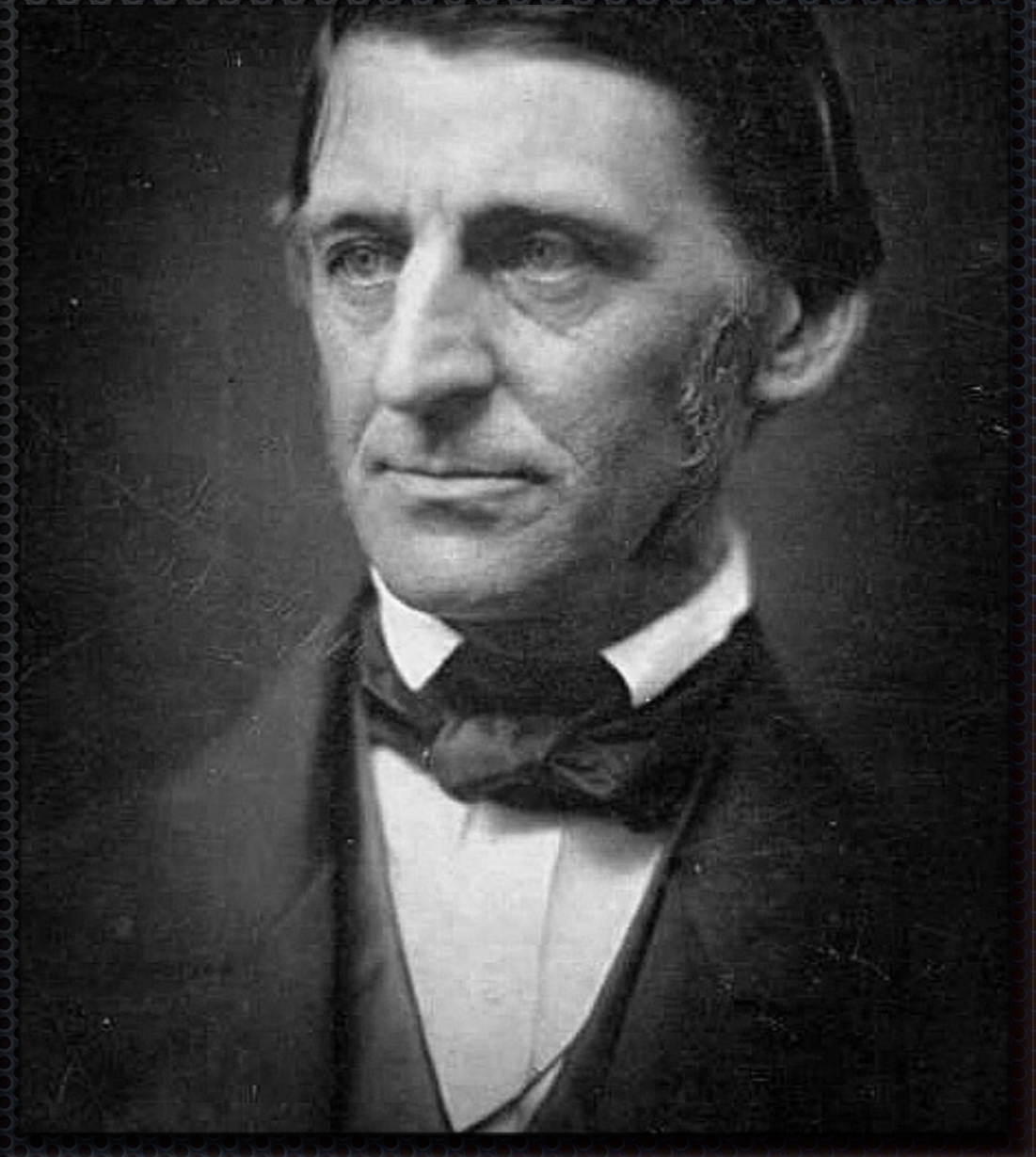
Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677)

- ✦ Is the difference between good and evil merely one of personal inclinations?
- ✦ “So everyone, by the highest right of Nature, judges what is good and what is evil, **considers his own advantage** according to his own temperament... ,
- ✦ **“In the state of nature, wrongdoing is impossible**; or, if anyone does wrong, it is to himself, not to another. For no one by the law of nature is bound to please another, unless he chooses, nor to hold anything to be good or evil, but what he himself, according to his own temperament, pronounces to be so.”



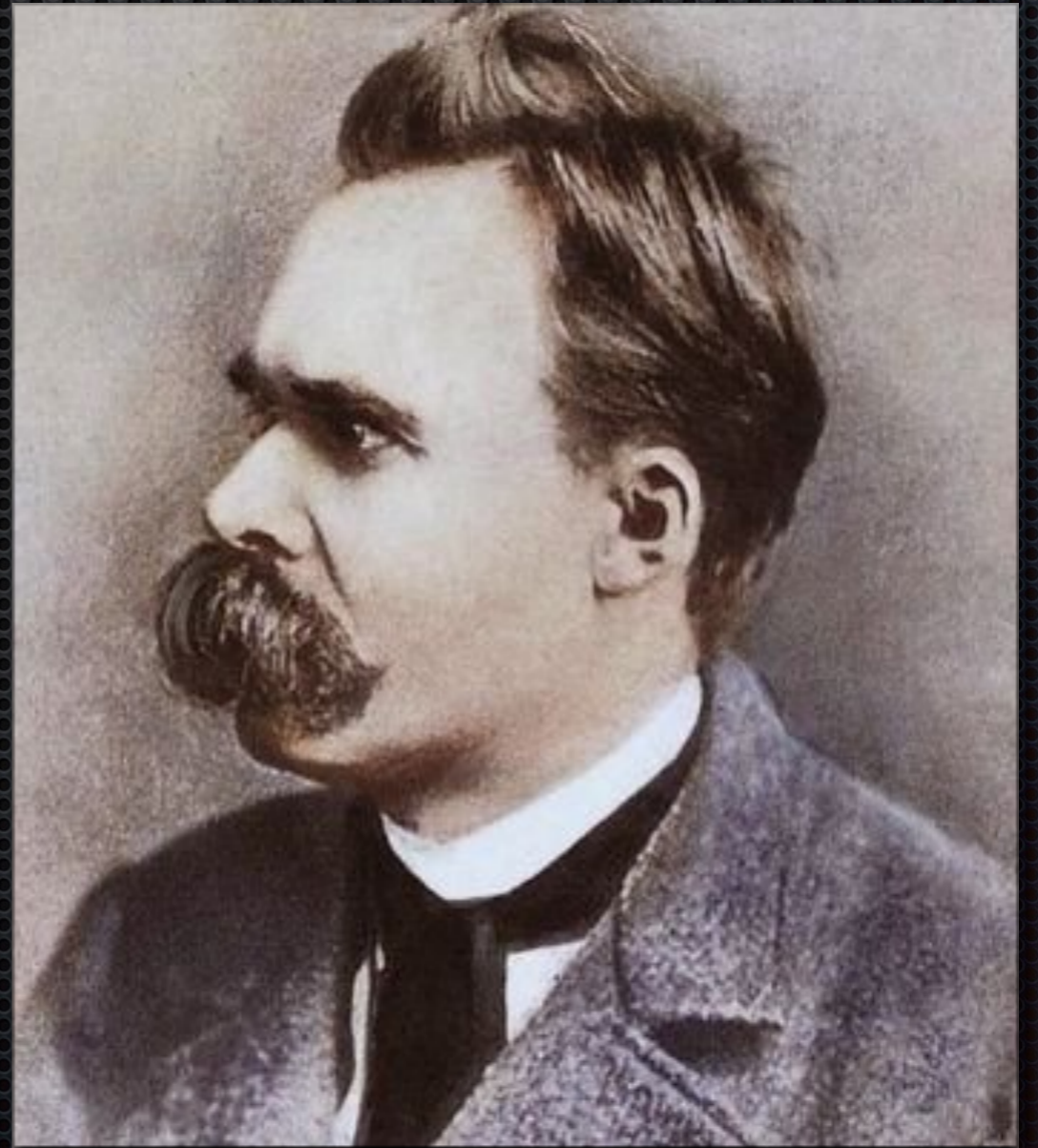
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

- What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?
- My friend suggested, — "But these impulses may be from below, not from above."
- I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil."
- No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.
- Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it."



Fredrick Nietzsche (1844-1900)

- ✦ “That which an age feels to be evil
- ✦ is usually an untimely echo of what was formerly considered good — the atavism of an old ideal.”



Dictionary

- a** : morally reprehensible : **sinful**, **wicked** an *evil* impulse

b : arising from actual or imputed bad character or conduct a person of *evil* reputation
- a** *archaic* : **inferior**

b : causing discomfort or repulsion : **offensive** an *evil* odor

c : **disagreeable** woke late and in an *evil* temper
- a** : causing harm : **pernicious** the *evil* institution of slavery

b : marked by misfortune : **unlucky**

Adjective: profoundly immoral and malevolent (“his *evil* deeds”)

- synonyms: wicked, bad, wrong, immoral, sinful, foul, vile, dishonorable, corrupt, iniquitous, depraved, reprobate, villainous, nefarious, vicious, malicious

- antonyms: good, virtuous

- (of a force or spirit) embodying or associated with the forces of the devil. “we have been driven out of the house by this evil spirit.” “the evil effects of high taxes”

- synonyms: cruel, mischievous, pernicious, malignant, malign, baleful, vicious;

- antonyms: good, beneficial

- (of something seen or smelled) extremely unpleasant. “a bathroom with an evil smell”

- synonyms: unpleasant, disagreeable, nasty, horrible, foul, disgusting, filthy, vile, noxious “a n evil smell”

- antonyms: pleasant

Noun: evil: profound immorality, wickedness, and depravity, especially when regarded as a supernatural force. ("the world is stalked by relentless evil")

- synonyms: wickedness, bad, badness, wrongdoing, sin, ill, immorality, vice, iniquity, degeneracy, corruption, depravity, villainy, nefariousness, malevolence

- a manifestation of this, especially in people's actions.

- synonyms: abomination, atrocity, obscenity, outrage, enormity, crime, monstrosity, barbarity "the evils of war"

- something that is harmful or undesirable. "sexism, racism, and all other unpleasant social evils"

- synonyms:

harm, pain, misery, sorrow, suffering, trouble, disaster, misfortune, catastrophe, affliction, woe, hardship "nothing but evil would ensue"

“Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats (1919)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the
desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at
last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

“I am not resigned to turning away,
from the loss or
from the systemic evil
that I believe
contradicts,
perverts,
destroys,
the sanctity of life.

And so, I study Evil.”

-Anne Porter: “A Famine Child”

“Why I Study Evil”
-The Rev. Anya Sammler Michael

The word “wrong” belongs to the field of ethics.

The word “evil” belongs to theology.

Sacred is not destroyed by bad.

Sacred is forsaken by evil.

What is evil?

- ✦ Intentional, Malicious, Malice of forethought
- ✦ Sadistic, Cruel (*lack of compassion/empathy*)
- ✦ Divisive
- ✦ “Evil doers” [*Foucault’s anti-essentialism*]
- ✦ Contextual/Situational

Discussion Questions

- ✦ Do you use the word evil?
 - ✦ Are you *comfortable* using the word “evil?” Why or why not?)
 - ✦ Should I/you/we/they be using the word evil more or less in such a time as this?
- ✦ Do you have a felt sense of what you mean when you regard something as “evil?”
 - ✦ Can you describe what it is that makes something “evil?”

Discussion Questions

- *How* is evil at work?
- What is the *source(s)* of evil?
- What is the *nature(s)* of evil?
- What is *your* definition of evil?

Milligram Obedience Experiment: Reflecting on Our Capacity for Evil

- [youtube.com/watch?v=fCVII-4GZQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCVII-4GZQ) (10 min)

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