Introduction

This book is the result of a compromise. A compromise between the desire, or need, to continue reflecting on evil, and the awareness that many of the concepts used to think about it are no longer usable; between the conviction that in relations of power there must circulate an ethical instance, and the certainty that the way to political moralizing has been barred to us forever. What approach can we take to the question of evil as it relates to power today, if the assumptions behind all claims to promoting the good—especially the political good—have been progressively delegitimized? Perhaps the first, unavoidable step is to declare that the dialectical relationship between good and evil has been broken once and for all. Hence, even if we are no longer able to believe that the good is fully realizable, we cannot and should not stop talking about evil.

A lot, if not everything, rides on the problem of suffering. Or more accurately, everything depends on whether suffering continues to be a *problem* for us, and in what way. In philosophical terms, it all depends on what significance we attribute to that ultimate phenomenological given—*the fact of pain and suffering*—which, even after its various stratifications of meaning have been deconstructed, remains before our eyes. This is not a question of the inescapable reality that inherently accompanies the finitude and vulnerability of our lives but, rather, what Emmanuel Levinas calls "useless suffering," which is *produced* out of human relations, and which propagates with varying intensity and range on the basis of the social and political context.

Although it is true that evil has been spoken of in many ways—as

numerous as the explanations or justifications offered by philosophy in response to the dismay caused by pain, suffering, and death—there is no doubt that its meaning has swung back and forth between two recurring alternatives that cut across the different historical periods of thought. It is as if the same dilemma constantly presented itself: either evil does not exist, because suffering is "innocent," or, if suffering is viewed as the sign of some "guilt," evil risks being transformed into an independent substance. Either, as we would say today, evil is a cultural prejudice, dismantled as soon as it is observed from the perspective of the whole, from the Platonic One to the Deleuzian "multiple-One"; or it is a reality at war with being, from ancient Gnosticism to the "theoconservatism" of our day. This ontological alternative has often assumed an unfortunate form in political thought: either the pain of individuals caused by violence and oppression is viewed as a necessary and negligible contribution to the success of the final "project" or it is the confirmatory sign of an advancing, destructive nihilism.

What direction are we to take, then, if we share the premises of critical and deconstructive thought but also believe that the problem of evil—whatever name we choose to give it, even that of the idea of evil itself—is not only still relevant but also, first and foremost, the *a priori* in the human animal's search for meaning? What stance can we take if we do not feel aligned or comfortable with the abstractions of a normative political philosophy that believes it can overcome the negative by invoking the "you must"; and if we feel equally remote from the "euphoric" currents of an ontological, political immanence for which evil is simply the cumbersome legacy of a theological and metaphysical conception of the world? It is hardly a trivial problem if what is referred to as "continental philosophy" seems to be increasingly polarized between two distinct blocks of opinion: on the one hand, an emphatic revival—both religious and post-Kantian—of a notion of "radical evil" made to serve as a negative rule from which to derive, by contrast, the tables of the new categorical imperatives; and on the other hand, the mocking shrug that claims to follow the immanent power of life beyond moral prejudices, "beyond good and evil."

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To redefine the contemporary relevance of the question of political evil, I therefore chose to take the byways, so to speak, offered by the genealogical approach. I put it to myself to examine the relationship be-

tween evil and power, focusing on the political repercussions of the different philosophical presuppositions. I attempted to recreate the conditions that made it possible to conceive of political evil starting from late modernity, in order to understand how the concepts that have defined it may be kept, reformulated, or discarded.

The point of departure for a journey of this kind can only be Kantian. Immanuel Kant's essay on "Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone," in which he returns to the problem of "radical evil," is truly a watershed with respect to the previous philosophical tradition. The definitive distinction that Kant established between physical evil, metaphysical evil, and moral evil allowed the purely theological and metaphysical question of "Where does evil come from?" to be replaced by the ethical, anthropological, and historical question of "Why do we commit evil deeds?" Thus, for the German philosopher, moral evil is no longer a substance, but neither is it a nonbeing. It is an act: an act that has to do with freedom. However, although Kant makes it possible to reflect on the complicated interplay between evil and freedom, by his own admission he is pulled up short by the "inscrutability" of the root of this connection. The possibility of evil actions that *intentionally* violate the moral law is unthinkable for him; the existence of human beings who pursue evil for the sake of evil is unacceptable.

To push beyond what Kant leaves "unspoken," to plumb the "diabolical abysses" of freedom, was the goal of later philosophical thought, which continued to seek out the "root" of evil. From Schelling to Heidegger, from Nietzsche to Levinas, from Freud to Lacan—to name only the main figures whose works I will examine—a path can be traced that radicalizes Kant's discovery to the point of overturning it, until transgressing the law, whether divine law or the imperative of reason, became identified as the main objective of evil.

In the philosophical thinking of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although appearing in radically different versions, the concepts of nihilism, the will to death, and the will to nothingness defined the horizon of understanding of the "new demons." Thought of as a disease of the will or as an instinctual drive, as the delirium of reason or as a passion for the absolute, evil in any case always involved the forces of transgression and disorder: in a word, *the power of death*. An eloquent, exemplary synthesis of this cluster of concepts appears in what I have decided to call the "Dostoevsky paradigm." Not so much because the literary equivalent of a

specific post-Kantian idea of evil is to be found in the pages of the great Russian writer—particularly in *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*—but because Dostoevsky's protagonists embody a set of insights, ideas, and concepts whose relationship, although changing, tends toward a clearly identifiable nexus. The schema that takes shape, not always directly and explicitly, starting from Stavrogin and his friends—*pars pro toto*—was for a long time the established condition of conceivability for evil. This paradigm, which I reconstruct, was one that Nietzsche and Freud participated in as well as Heidegger and Levinas (although their contributions to it differed). The works of these thinkers more than any others were turning points in a possible history of the contemporary idea of evil. However, we should perhaps note that this paradigm partly owes its existence to a "simple" way of reading these authors. As I show in the sections devoted to these thinkers, I am convinced that another perspective opens up from some of their writings, one that can easily merge into another, alternative genealogy.

There is no doubt in my mind that the expressive power with which the Russian genius gives life to his nihilistic, destructive demons not only definitively names the "secret" of radical evil that Kant had failed to reveal, but it also clarifies its conditions of possibility, placing evil in relation to the question of power. Maybe what looms up for the first time in *Demons* is the distinction between wickedness and evil, between a subject's way of being and the "systemic" outcome of the interaction between subjects. If wickedness has to do with the structure of the individual conscience, evil is a mode of the expression of power. Or, rather, it is the occurrence of a wicked situation in history, so to speak, that is the effect of a collective interaction between trespassing freedoms. All the characters misuse their free will in individual ways. But it is certain that for Dostoevsky the various demons, which correspond to the various ways in which evil makes itself visible, share the same absolute desire: to take the place of God and his infinite freedom. However, as finite creatures, since they are incapable of creating, they can only destroy. This is how evil comes into the world, for Dostoevsky and for all those who follow in his tracks. Evil enters the world as a diabolical disease of power; a power that, because it exceeds all limits, can only be the pure energy of oppression and domination, an inexhaustible source of suffering and death.

Nihilism, evil, and power: these form a conceptual triangulation within which, in a kind of secularization of the theological assumptions,

many of the philosophers of the twentieth century believed it was possible to circumscribe the tragedies of their history. Will, omnipotence, and nothingness: although no longer framed in Dostoevsky's religious outlook, the correlation between these three terms was taken up and reworked by later philosophers, who continued to think of evil as a result of the perversion of the will in omnipotence, as the result of a sovereign subject—whether collective or individual makes no difference—that by raising itself up to the All creates Nothingness. This is a "simple," unidirectional vision of power that remains faithful to the model of sovereign and subjects, whose demonic cypher, also masterfully illustrated by the Russian writer, is depicted most forcefully in the relationship between victim and perpetrator. In other words, on the one hand there stands an omnipotent subject, bearer of death, and on the other, a subject reduced to a mere object, because he or she has been made totally passive by the other's violence. The same polarized view extends to the collective dimension and allows it to be modeled according to a similar, dualistic structure: on the one hand, a cynical leader who exploits the weaknesses of others, and on the other, the weak masses who are utterly incapable of resistance. The hermeneutic capacity of this schema has been expanded—as part of the nihilistic hypothesis that supports it—to include the key experiences of the twentieth century: total war, planetary, destructive technology, repeated genocides, and above all, Auschwitz. These are the new phenomena by which evil manifests itself in history, and for which there seems to be no better explanation than "a pure unleashing of the will to death."

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There is no doubt that focusing the gaze on the "accursed share," on the abyss of the subject and "being," has helped to go beyond the Kantian "prohibition." However, this way of thinking about evil and power, as well as about their relationship, is likely to rigidify our understanding of reality into overly schematic, unilateral categories. In the end, even in the most developed thinking on the topic, the emphasis is always given exclusively to the dark, transgressive face of a subjectivity that is avid for destruction. Inevitably, this leads to a return of the dualistic schema, which obscures the complex phenomenology of power and, equally, that of the scenes of evil.

The time has come, I believe, *to let go of the Dostoevsky paradigm*. We must leave it behind in order to understand the "black heart" of the

twentieth century, and, even more urgently, to be able to contend with the concerns of today. Our present times no longer allow power to be represented as the simple frontal relation between the state and individual bearers of rights. At the same time, political evil—even the political evil that lurks in our Western democracies—can no longer be purely understood as the result of an unleashing of wickedness. The scene of evil is a complex scene where the will to nothingness and death do not reign supreme. Political philosophy has been stuck for too long in this paradigm, so that it never completely rids itself of a conception of domination linked to this "grandiose" idea of evil. In other words, it has continued to think of the relationship of power, which becomes an event of evil, along the binary lines of a dualistic, rigidly polarized conception, as if the eternal Dostoevskian scene of the violation of children—the quintessential innocent victims—were to repeat itself throughout history. Political tragedies, the grimmest events, have been analyzed according to this topology: *wicked demons* on the one side and *absolute victims* on the other.

There evidently exists a metaphysical and theological *a priori* that continues to affect us, often unconsciously. It is almost as if we refuse to look deeply into the intricate web of political relations and do not want to become aware of what happens before arriving at that final scene of domination, where, it is true, the most absolute asymmetry does indeed reign. We therefore need to dismantle this demonological vision of power and rely instead on an analytical model that no longer attributes evil exclusively to the desire for and will to death.

This change of perspective received a significant boost from Hannah Arendt's thought, and above all from that of Michel Foucault, clearing the way to contemporary reflection on biopolitics and biopower, among other things. In the middle part of this book, after reexamining their contributions, I look into several interesting discussions that have emerged from the reappraisal of their legacy. From historical studies on genocides to research on the theory of race, thought on biopolitics has contributed greatly to shifting the focus from the power of putting to death to strategies for maximizing life. It has directed our attention to how making life a unique, undisputed value has paradoxically fostered the mass production of death. An entire field of investigation and thought has thus changed its vantage point on evil, without explicitly discussing it, now focusing less on the omnipotent will of the perpetrators and more on the condition of the

victims, who are transformed into waste material in the name of the absolutization of life.

There is no doubt that any attempt to rethink the relationship between evil and power cannot help but return to the historical scene epitomized by Auschwitz, and to how it has been interpreted. Myriad unanswered questions remain, however. What does the status of "absolute victim" mean in relation to the scientific and ideological obsession for enhancing life? If we start from the premise—now a commonplace among historians—that for a genocide to take place there must first be *a process of dehumanization and de-subjectification of the future victim*, we must nevertheless look more closely into how this process takes place. Is it really arrived at through the unleashing of a supposedly "naturalistic" nihilism that goes "beyond good and evil"? These are the questions I ask myself when revisiting some Nazi texts on racial theory, following a double thread that runs through them: the image of the parasite and the relationship between Soul, Body, and Type. Is it really true, as claimed by many interpreters of biopower—from historians of genocide to post-Foucauldian thinkers—that in the racist discourse the body of the future victim of extermination is emptied of human and moral meaning? Rather, is it not saturated with a "hypermoral" meaning that claims to know how to go about separating death from life? I believe that the supposed neutrality of a knowledge that was believed to be scientific, far from foundering in a nihilistic drift, has continued to exert a powerful influence through the traditional dichotomy of good and evil.

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In short, how does one exit permanently from both the dualistic culture that nurtures the scenes of evil and the often unconscious, although opposite, dualism of the many interpreters who judge those scenes? I certainly do not want to come to the discovery that the perpetrators do not exist, or that they are innocent, and that the victims are guilty. But I think we should break down these logical dichotomies to transform them into a field of forces and tensions, in which the antinomies lose their substantial identity. This is not to oppose the Dostoevsky paradigm to a contrary, specular way of thinking, but to place alongside it another paradigmatic set of concepts that integrates, at the same time as it unblocks, the geometry that is rigidly fixed on the separation between absolute subjects and objects of domination. A different genealogy of the relationship between evil

and power can thus be brought to light: a genealogy that finally puts into question the inextricable, recurrent link between transgression, power, and death. This is the approach that was first taken in the third chapter of Genesis, which ever since has continued to conceive of evil as the action of a creature that is essentially rebellious, because deep down it seeks to equal divine omnipotence. I believe that, for a long time now, this anthropological figure is not the one whose dangers we need to guard ourselves from anymore. I think that today, more than ever, what needs to be questioned instead is the desire for rules and conformity that cements our lives in irresponsibility and indifference, a desire that philosophy, apart from a few exceptions, has not wanted or known how to take on.

The second and final part of the book thus seeks to tie the threads together so as to outline a different way of thinking about the hendiadys of evil and power and to propose a new paradigm: that of "mediocre demons" or "the normalcy of evil." My intellectual debt toward Arendt's famous work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* is evident. Her book successfully transformed a particular occurrence into an event that was emblematic of an era, transposing Adolf Eichmann's trial into a general historical and theoretical redefinition of many political problems. However, because she passed away before completing *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt did not have time to develop the set of ideas that connect evil to an absence of judgment and to conformity. And rather than provide a reasoned argument on this association, she tied its conception to an expression, one that in my opinion is not entirely convincing—"the banality of evil"—which has left us with a long list of unanswered questions.

Now, there have been many ways to continue and elaborate on Arendt's legacy. The historical disciplines and some currents of social psychology were the first to try to overturn the equation between evil and transgression, investigating between the folds of so-called crimes of obedience. I give a quick overview of these, also pointing out the limits of these approaches from a philosophical point of view. To say that evil is systemic, as they do, that it does not stem from an innate "disposition" of the perpetrators, however, cannot be restricted to meaning that evil is the result of the outcome of an authoritarian context. True: evil is a system, in the sense of a tangle of subjectivities, a network of relations, whose threads knit together thanks to the perfect complementarity between (a few) wicked actors and originators, (a few) zealous, committed agents, and (many)

acquiescent, not simply indifferent, spectators. But why do these cogs and wheels fit together so well?

Thinking within the paradigm of mediocre demons means primarily putting into question the exclusive role of the will to and desire for death, and instead viewing the scenes of evil as powerfully inhabited by the will to life, as the result of an attempt to maximize life itself. It also means focusing less on the "guilt" of the transgression and more on the devious normativity of nonjudgment, endorsed and celebrated by the morality that has so often taught us that judging is a sign of pride, that it is the shadow of that first sin committed by our first parents: the sin of disobedience.

Mediocre demons do not replace "absolute demons," of course. This is not what I mean by my work. Absolute demons exist, and still exist today; but if their efforts are successful it is because they seamlessly integrate into the desire of all those who, being too occupied with consolidating their life opportunities, adapt without reacting. For this reason, today, rather than pursuing the impossible goal of saying goodbye to the subject—an act that implicitly continues to adopt the subject as a synonym of violence and arrogance—it is important to ask how power and subjectivity constitute each other and are mutually reinforcing; to question not so much why we become wicked subjects but rather, above all, how we become obedient subjects. We need to understand what sort of delusion inspires our omnipotence; but even more we need to try and explain what desire motivates our anxiety to conform.

A genealogy of mediocre demons—and indirectly of pastoral power—must weave together the philosophical contributions of texts that, perhaps not always explicitly, have asked themselves these very questions. Accordingly, I track down the passages in Nietzsche's thought in which the critique of democracy, passivity, and conformism is not "simple" in the least, and in which the will to life plays an extremely ambivalent role. I have focused on the continuity detected between Christianity and the modern world in order to emphasize, and use, the complexity with which Nietzsche describes the process of subjectification that made the human animal docile and controllable, manipulable and obedient, bringing us one of the first and most powerful investigations into the link between subjectivity and power. I then search the work of Foucault, his personal continuation of the Nietzschean genealogy, for the possibility of naming political evil and of locating it at the highest point of subjective dependency, in

those "states of domination" that suppressed the play or the movement between freedom and power. I draw arguments from his writings on governmentality and pastoral power, and even more from the lectures of his later years devoted to the "care of the self" and *parrhesia*, to try to formulate some partial answers to the questions that are key to the paradigm of mediocre devils. First of all: How is a relationship of subordination cemented? What kind of subjectification was introduced in the Christian West so as to make the relationship of care and protection a perfect mechanism for the production of generalized dependency? And also: How are the conditions of possibility for resistance to political evil to be conceived? Why was an entire field of experience, from the "care of the self" to *parrhesia*, removed from the spectrum of examples on which to model our ethical and political conduct? In a word, does another way of becoming subjects exist?

If so, it can only stem from an ethos that changes the perception of life and death and of their relationship; from a "way of life" that never silences its inner duality and that does not reify it into an internal essence of the good and an external substance of evil. What I seek to demonstrate is that these questions and their possible answers are not only significant for individual ethics, they can also be directly transposed onto the political and collective planes. This is what I try to show by reconstructing the theoretical ties that Foucauldian thought has forged with what has been called the philosophy of dissent from Central and Eastern Europe, especially with several Prague thinkers—from Jan Patočka to Václav Havel—who were engaged in the Charter 77 experience. In some ways it is easier to reexamine the philosophical and political contribution of the "dissidents" today than it was in the past: many of the allegations of anticommunism and philocapitalism that were directed against them have lost all meaning. However, my interest does not lie so much in rehabilitating an important chapter of European culture, one that is often overlooked, as it does in finding a "testing ground," so to speak, of the revolutionary character of an ethos that always confronts itself anew with the infinite and unsolvable problem of the meaning of a "life in truth." Because in actuality, living in truth—a prerequisite for the practice of *parrhesia*—is simply the witnessing of a life that ruthlessly questions itself on its own internal conflicts, and for this reason decides to make "inner anarchy" the terrain on which to cultivate a different political virtue, with the hope that this can be transmitted, by contagion, to the collective dimension. This is with all due

respect to Fyodor Dostoevsky, who, in accordance with the most authoritative theological and metaphysical convictions on evil, was convinced that the subversive force of demons could be extinguished only by reining the two back into the One.

Ultimately, what Primo Levi also courageously examined were the political repercussions of a fatal, dualistic opposition between life and death. Perhaps it is no coincidence that he never really warmed to Dostoevsky. Everything in Levi's last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, can be read as a refutation of *Demons* and the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, of that Manichean conception of power that opens up an abysmal distance between the feverish will of the wicked for power and death, and the passive obedience of the masses. Everything in *The Drowned and the Saved* forces us to take note of the normal, and yet at the same time perverse, functioning of the gray zone, which, unfortunately, does not only connect the opposite poles of the fence at Auschwitz. To think about the muted colors of the link between evil and power, above all from the point of view of the desire for life, is the difficult task bequeathed to us by Levi's last words, which were certainly not aimed exclusively at analyzing the circumstances of the death camp. Even in far less "extreme" situations, the gesture that separates life from death, absolutizing them in their opposition, always runs the risk of bringing along with it the conditions of evil. Or at least this is how I think *The Drowned and the Saved* should be read.