

OUT OF EDEN

Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil



Paul W. Kahn

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out love, we are back in that state of existential loneliness that characterized the second Genesis story.

We may no longer live in a world of the sacred, but we continue to live in one where we are very much aware of the threat of that existential loneliness that was Adam's fate before Eve. We no longer know how to speak of this world. Still, we have no better cure for this loneliness than the two-become-one of love. And, as is already clear from the myth, not even this is enough, for love cannot save us from knowledge of our own death. When we demand this of love, we become evil.

CHAPTER FOUR



POLITICAL EVIL: SLAVERY AND THE SHAME OF NATURE

In the last chapter I offered an interpretation of the Adam and Eve myth which puts at its center the loneliness of a subject who knows he will die. Refusing to acknowledge his finitude, the subject murders those who are in a position to recognize his death. Evil is less about a moral demand for recognition of the other as an autonomous subject—the concern of justice—than it is about the refusal to imagine the self as an object, that is, the dead body that is no longer subject but only object. Evil produces unjust acts, but to understand the source and power of evil we must turn from the demand of the other for equality to the subject's flight from death. The evil person may know he is acting unjustly, but justice is not an answer to the problem of death. The same is true of the lover: he, too, may act unjustly for the sake of the objects of his love. Adam knows he should not eat of the apple, but he chooses love even at the cost of death. If evil arises out of the flight from death, the possibility of accepting death remains bound to love. That love makes death possible—that is, acceptable to the imagination—is an old thought. This is implicit in the argument I offered that self-sacrifice is the action of love.

Evil can appear within the same domain as love, because the subject before whom we refuse to appear as a dying body is often someone to whom we are already bound: friends, lovers, family. These are the relationships within which one imagines one's future, and that future inevitably ends in death. These relationships constitute what we might think of as the ordinary boundaries of the testamentary imagination—the subjects who will appear in my will. These are the people to whom I am closely bound through love. In the previous chapter my concern was with love in its intimate, familial forms. Eros, however, is not

exhausted in these forms of intimacy. In this chapter and the next I pursue the forms of evil as it appears in Western political experience. Here, again, we find a close relationship between evil, love, and the knowledge of death. In politics, too, injustice is not a sufficiently expansive or rich concept to capture what is at stake in evil.

In the personal life of the family, evil takes the form of murder, but this is largely metaphoric killing. In politics, murder is not metaphorical at all. Can we understand the character of political evil as a kind of enlargement or projection of the same familial dynamic of love and hatred—this time, however, resulting in actual murder? Is the evil of politics a murderous response to the recognition of finitude? There are certainly some grounds for thinking that the analogy holds. After all, the history of many Western states was once tied to the history of particular families. We do not have to read *King Lear* to understand that political and familial pathologies have often been linked. Still today political communities rely upon bonds of affection among citizens. Similarly, states continue to cultivate sentiments of patriotism and nationalism, which are surely kinds of love. In politics, unlike families, however, love and killing are more often aligned than opposed. Love of the state has often taken the form of a willingness to battle its enemies.

Regardless of what Western political theory has written about safety and justice as the ends of the political community, Western politics has, in fact, been characterized by the reciprocal phenomena of citizen sacrifice and killing of the enemy. The sovereign nation-state is distinguished from other forms of association by virtue of its capacity to deploy force. It has, in the familiar Weberian phrase, “a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”¹ This capacity is ordinarily a function of its ability to call upon its own citizens to sacrifice themselves. That willingness is not a function of justice alone: individuals are rarely willing to sacrifice for a state that is not their own, regardless of how just its cause. Conversely, they can remain willing to sacrifice for their own state even if they believe a particular government policy is unjust—although there are likely to

¹ M. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* 77–78 (H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, eds. and trans. 1946).

be limits on how much injustice they will tolerate. What needs explanation is the bond to the political community which precedes these judgments of justice and injustice. True, that bond commits the individual to an interest in making this *particular* community just. Nevertheless, the state’s unique ability to demand sacrifice and the citizen’s willingness to sacrifice are the fundamental political phenomena that theory must explain.²

We need not celebrate the violence of politics, but we must recognize the possibility of violence that attaches essentially, not accidentally, to the experience of the political. The state, and only the state, has the power to conscript. To understand oneself as a citizen in the modern nation-state has been to recognize the possibility that one can be legitimately called upon to sacrifice in defense of the state. Even today, when conscription is out of fashion, we recognize that political identity carries deadly risks as well as rewards. We can be the target of violence for no other reason than we are citizens of a particular state. Of course, we argue about the conditions under which sacrifice can be legitimately demanded. We want the state to fight only just wars. But from the beginning of any such argument, we acknowledge the possibility that those conditions can be met. The just wars of this state, and of no other, are ours to fight.

Still, the question is whether the killing we find in politics is a form of the evil of murder analyzed in the last chapter. Is the political phenomenon of war, for example, a kind of mass expression of individual citizens’ flight from the recognition of the possibility of their own death? On its face, this claim seems implausible, since there is no killing in politics that does not involve a reciprocal risk of death. Violent political conflict is a kind of reciprocity of self-sacrifice: to threaten the enemy is to be threatened in turn. Here, killing the other brings us closer to the fact of our own death. It is a turning toward, not a turning away, from death.

Because politics is a field of potential killing and being killed, the killing of another loses its character as a marker of evil. Consider the paradigmatic political phenomenon of battle: Is the field of battle the scene of virtue or evil? To be in battle is to accept a reciprocity of risk,

² This is the fundamental theme of P. Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (2005).

which means that battle relies substantially on a willing self-sacrifice on both sides. We know that the field of battle, violent as it is, is also a field of love, as individual soldiers sacrifice themselves for friend, comrades, units, and ultimately the nation. Under these circumstances, killing can be a mark of personal heroism or courage, as well as of communal commitment. Killing cannot be condemned as universally evil without rewriting the moral and historical imagination of the state and its citizens. They will not ordinarily judge their own efforts of self-sacrifice as evil, even if others see those same acts as murderous. Political evil, however, is not simply a matter of one's point of view, as if the other side is always evil. Evil is a pathology of politics that is just as likely to appear in one's own political culture as in another.

To understand political evil, we must take up a specifically political point of view, that is, the form of self-understanding that creates and maintains political power. Politics, Aristotle noted, begins with speech—not, however, just any speech. We have politics only when individuals take up as a topic of ongoing discussion the meanings for which they are willing to exercise their collective, coercive capacity. In part, this is a matter of internal regulation, of the laws and practices that govern the community; it is also partly a matter of external self-expression, of how the community shows itself to the rest of the world. In both these respects, the political community stands for something; it is a product of ideas as much as of material resources. Members may disagree over the character of these ideas, but such disagreements, unless they break the community apart, are like arguments over the meaning of a common text. They affirm, rather than undermine, the representational character of political life. Politics is sustained by this debate over who we are. Were the members to find that the community stands for nothing or nothing important to them, politics might be replaced by mere administration—bureaucratic efficiency would replace political debate.

Political power is the capacity to give substantial form and material embodiment to one set of ideas over another. Ideas have political power only insofar as members of the community are willing to

defend them.³ Too much emphasis on politics as discourse misses the critical fact that at some point discussion ends and the act follows: campaigns end with the vote, jury deliberations end with a verdict, legislative debate ends with enactment, and foreign policy debate ends with the threat or use of force. Talk can go on forever. Politics is not academic debate, because its discourse is cabined by the act. Politics is about the coercive power of ideas, but that power arises in the first insistence from citizens' willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the political community. A regime that sustains itself only through the deployment of force by "outsiders" may express the political life of that other community, but it represents a failure of the political in the community over which it rules. Politics, in this case, is reborn in resistance.

A political idea for which no one is willing to sacrifice himself lacks power; it is a mere abstraction. It might be a good idea, but it does not belong to any particular community. For its sake, no one is prepared to give up anything. To understand political evil, then, we need to understand the pathologies that arise in the relationship of an idea to its political embodiment. Here a religious conception, transubstantiation, can help us: this is the mystery by which an idea of the sacred takes on a material form. Politics is just such a process of transubstantiation: it links ideas to action, voice to force. Thus, where we find politics, we find rhetoric—debate—and armies.⁴ Political evil appears when something goes deeply wrong in the process of transubstantiation.

Instead of looking at politics through the prism of murder—the pathology of love—we need to take up the problems of slavery and killing. I treat slavery in this chapter, and killing in the next. In each instance, I show how the particular practice—slavery or killing—offers a paradigm through which to view a wider category of political evil. Together, they cover the ground of much of what we ordinarily consider the evils of politics, including subordination, physical abuse, unjust war, and genocide.

³ See R. Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term—Foreword: Nomos and Narrative" 97 *Harv. L. Rev.* 4 (1983).

⁴ By "armies," I mean all the instruments of coercive power, including police.

The paradigm of slavery is at stake whenever the merely natural element of man's character is projected on to an other. The slave is what we are not: nature without culture. If the slave is pure nature, the master is not a product of nature at all. He creates himself by embodying an idea. To embody an idea in politics is to express a willingness to sacrifice for it. Not accidentally, the same American culture that practiced slavery was also one which thought of itself as particularly committed to the military virtues of honor and sacrifice.

When the rituals of sacrifice fail and we are left with only the pain of the suffering body, we are in the domain of torture. This will be my most controversial claim: when politics loses its power of transubstantiation, it becomes torture. On this view, the soldier at the front who loses his faith and confronts only the possibility of his own destruction for an idea in which he sees nothing at all is in the same position as the torture victim, who suffers in the secret cell of the authoritarian regime. Through self-sacrifice we seek to transcend death by becoming the embodiment of the idea of the nation. If we no longer believe that is possible, then the suffering of political life literally makes no sense to us. Both soldier and victim, then, anticipate death and mutilation for the sake of an idea that they view as making no claim upon them at all. Both might overcome this perception of torture by thinking of themselves as martyrs sacrificing themselves for the truth of some other idea. Both may reject entirely the claim of self-transcendence through suffering. In that case, their suffering becomes mere torture. Again, the place to begin is with a reading of Adam and Eve, for no less than in our personal lives, this myth has informed our deepest imaginings of the political.

MAN AS AN IMAGE OF GOD: NATURE AND LABOR

In the first Genesis account, man is created in the image of God. He does not represent the divine because of what he can achieve; labor comes later, in the second narrative. Rather, as created, he already manifests a sacred quality. Before the Fall, the natural self inspires awe, not shame. We know this phenomenon today, for example, in the experience of wilderness or in the presence of the newborn. Both can leave us with a sense of awe at the majesty of life before it is

shaped by convention. That awe points in two directions at once—to the majesty of the natural and the wonder of the human. We cannot separate the two, for man is the point at which nature gains consciousness of itself.

After the Fall, however, there is nothing awesome about nature. It is that against which we labor. Nature, we say, must be "tamed." We clothe the self not just to hide our participation in the natural but literally to do away with it. Our nature is no longer to be a part of nature; rather, our nature is to be unnatural. The natural is now the less than human. It is that which must be given a human form—made to serve human goals—through labor. We cannot see through the clothes to the natural man, and we do not want to. When we are forced to view the naked body, we are reminded of the ultimate corruption of the flesh. Man is fully himself only in a world of human convention. That is the world that puts off the ultimate shame of nature—that we die.

The shame of nature spoken of in the myth is not just the shame of actual nakedness but the shame of being reminded that there is a naked body beneath the clothes. We carry this shame forward even when we are fully clothed. We feel shame at others' nakedness, as much as at our own, because we cannot see the former without being reminded of the latter. We avert our eyes, wanting to see nothing but the clothed subject. We want to live in a fully clothed society, that is, a world given shape by human agency. We get confused on this point if we imagine the other as the model of beauty. Even here, outside the boundaries of art, we are likely to feel shame, as much as fascination, with the naked body portrayed, for example, in pornography.⁵ But first of all and most of the time, the naked body is that of the aging and the old, the injured and the out of shape—that is, life in all its commonplace forms, which include ourselves. The nude that is the object of beauty in art is not the shameful, naked body of Genesis two. It may indeed be the divine image of Genesis one. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Fall, recovery of that image is the product of the labor of culture.

⁵ On the double character of the pornographic, see Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* 183–227.

Genesis one and two capture a fundamental ambiguity in our attitudes toward our “natural self” and our place in nature. Is the naked self the source of shame because it is less than human—the fallen condition that we begin to transcend only through the act of clothing the body—or is it the point at which we affirm our connection with a sacred nature? Is man’s nature something to be achieved by his own labor, guided by his own knowledge of good and evil, or is it something given, perhaps to be recovered as we might recover the wilderness from the encroaching civilization? Do we claim to be an image of God because we are the end point of divine creation or because we have the capacity to create our own world? Are we an image of God as created objects or as creative subjects? Becoming like God was exactly what the serpent promised when he tempted Eve with the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but, according to the first myth, she already was an image of God.

These are not antinomies that can be resolved, which is just why the Adam and Eve myth appears both as a story of the sacred character of the truth of our nature and as a story of the burden of self-creation. At least, the antinomy cannot be resolved on its own terms. In Christianity, the resolution is the appearance of Christ, whose naked, suffering body—literally, a divine body—takes on the shame of nature for all men. His pain becomes the point of universal redemption, allowing believers to remain clothed even in death. Nakedness may characterize Hell but not those resurrected to God’s presence. There is no going back to the Garden.

Whatever one may believe about Christology, man finds himself located in the antinomy of the unclothed and the clothed. Man is always a part of nature and always apart from nature. He can always appeal to nature to attack the artificial character of conventionality. Conversely, he can appeal to convention to condemn the merely natural as base and shameful. Choosing to locate the truth of his character in one direction always exposes him to criticism from the other. Failing to exercise knowledge and will—labor—he will experience shame; exercising those faculties, he will experience sin. He is caught between the shame of his nakedness and the sin of his knowledge.

Because this dualism is fundamental, it informs our everyday experience of ourselves and others. We use it to sort out preferences and

identify character types. The myths of *Genesis*, for example, describe two different personalities: those who find self-realization in a stripping away of convention and those who find it in the projects of culture. Some flee the city to find the truth of themselves in nature; others flee from nature to the city. Some believe that the truth of the self is to be discovered; others believe that the self is a project for construction. Each is likely to see the other as profoundly mistaken, as failing to see the fundamental source of the possibility of a full and meaningful life. Similarly, the myths describe two different philosophical approaches: Do we look for the truth of the human condition in an unsullied conscience or pure reason, on the one hand, or in the cultivation of civilization or character, on the other?

As in all such antinomies, the terms themselves do not have a particular content. The categories shape a debate, the content of which depends on the circumstances. Because of this, their applications are easily reversible.⁶ In the abstract, we can never say what is natural and what is conventional. Any particular context can be described as natural or conventional; we cannot know which it is in advance of a particular argumentative situation. The most conventional of social arrangements can be criticized as nothing but a manifestation of nature. Justice in the city, Thrasymachus already argued in the *Republic*, is only the interest of the stronger. The social order can always be criticized as nothing but a manifestation of an unjust nature, for the stronger interests always dominate the weaker. In this sense, politics replicates the natural world of animals; it is, accordingly, shameful. Such beliefs can lead to revolutionary efforts at reconstruction or to a turning away from politics as inevitably an expression of man’s fallen nature. That same social order, however, can be criticized as mere convention that does not do justice to man’s nature. Rousseau’s project was to align the political and the natural equality of man. Nietzsche turned Thrasymachus around and argued that justice was only the unnatural victory of the interests of the weaker. From one perspective, nature is shameful and must be civilized; from the other, nature sets forth the norm, whether of Rousseauian equality or Nietzschean in-

⁶ See, e.g., J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* 139–50 (1982); J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 62–63 (1976).

equality. Even the most apparently conventional context—for example, a cityscape—can be portrayed by the artist as an exemplar of nature. Conversely, wilderness can be deconstructed to show that it is nothing but a particular cultural manifestation.⁷ This conceptual indeterminacy is the contemporary version of *Genesis*, which tells us that naked man is both an image of the divine and shameful.

Despite this indeterminacy, certain patterns of argument emerge in the way the Western political imagination uses the double myths of *Genesis*. We use the myth of man as an image of God to speak of fundamental rights that attach to all men everywhere. This is the Lockean state of nature. Jefferson appealed to this myth to give expression to the moral foundation upon which American nationhood was to stand: “All men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.” Even as he is created, man already has these rights. All men have these rights, regardless of their conventional circumstances. We feel no shame in our common humanity but appeal to it as the source of norms and principles that precede and measure the work of political construction. Jefferson hardly invented this use of *Genesis* one, and its use remains vitally present.

This is the mythic source of the strong egalitarian strand of Western political culture. We are all equal, because we are all created beings standing in just the same relationship to God.⁸ We find the same divine imprint in each and every person. No person falls below this level; each is a subject with moral rights; each should have the same legal rights. We are to see in the poor and the naked not the shame of nature but the bearers of rights. Each can demand, and is entitled to, equal recognition. Accordingly, rights are not an achievement of man’s labor in the production of political culture; rather, they are a recovery of that nature which is there from the beginning. To offend against this equality is to offend God by disrespecting the product of his creative act. Respecting that divine presence is the demand that “natural law”

⁷ What we mean by “wilderness” is hardly the way that other peoples have seen nature; where we see promise, they may have seen only threat. See, e.g., W. Cronan, “The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *id.*, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* 69–90 (1995); R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Imagination* 1, 273 (1973).

⁸ See G. Fletcher, “In God’s Image: The Religious Imperative of Equality under Law,” 99 *Col. L. Rev.* 1608 (1999).

makes upon any political order. Governments are put into place, Jefferson and Locke tell us, to enforce the rights we have by nature. When they fail to do so, they should be replaced.

This myth continually fuels a strand of antipolitical politics in the West. The aim of the political, on this conception, is to realize the natural. A perfect politics would be one that was invisible, allowing man’s true nature to show itself fully. This is the attraction of the idea of the withering away of the state, of visions of utopian simplicity—for example, of yeoman farmers—and of a general skepticism about government. On this view, the virtues of politics are not those of the labor of self-creation but of recovery and preservation. Of course, the divine character of natural man can be interpreted in many different ways, and there are many different utopian visions in the history of the West. The myth will not tell us whether we should locate the natural self that politics is to recover in the operation of free markets or in the preservation of the environment. It may not even tell us about the place of hierarchy, since nature in *Genesis* already includes a hierarchy of man over beast and, arguably, of man over woman.

This belief in nature as the measure of political convention continues in contemporary human rights discourse. Imagining natural man as an image of God, however, must be juxtaposed to one of the sharpest lessons of modernity: the possibility of a political rage directed at the merely natural man. In the concentration camps of the twentieth century man was indeed stripped naked, reduced to nothing but the natural thing itself: “a bare forked animal.” Everywhere the response was the same—not sympathy and not respect for the natural man but revulsion before the shameful spectacle of natural man.⁹ Too often, out of this revulsion emerged organized, systematic murder. If all that man can rely on before political power is his claim to be naturally an image of God, then he may indeed be doomed.¹⁰ In the camps of the twentieth century we find a reminder of the moral economy of that form of slavery which was brought to an end less than one hundred years earlier. We find natural man as the shame of nature.

⁹ American experience in Iraq—particularly the scandal of Abu Ghraib prison—are a recent reminder of this phenomenon.

¹⁰ See H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 300 (1973) (“It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man”).

The human rights community has too often assumed that it is enough to defend the naked man as the bearer of natural rights. But this lesson of equal rights has never been absent in the West. It was, we might say, there at creation. The problem has been that it has not been enough, for it is countered by the second moment of the mythical narrative in which nature is the source of shame. In American history we do not have to look far to find this second element operating alongside the first. Jefferson, who wrote eloquently of the equality of all men, lived in a slave society and himself maintained a large number of slaves. Reconciling the ideals of the Declaration of Independence with the reality of a slave society has been a perennial problem in understanding the American, revolutionary mind.¹¹ The double character of the myths of *Genesis* helps at just this point.

GENESIS TWO: THE SHAME OF NATURE

Slavery may have been inconsistent with the first moment of the *Genesis* myth, but it gave visual embodiment to the second.¹² The slave was the natural man, the man stripped of even his clothing. In this image of man, the slave-holding society recognized the shame of nature. This does not mean that it was ashamed of itself for treating men as less than images of God, although some men, including Jefferson, certainly did feel such shame.¹³ Just the opposite. To be a slave was shameful; slavery was not. For many, slavery seemed the appropriate response to the shameful condition of the slave. The slave is a reminder of the Fall—of naked man before the beginning of that recovery that is the

¹¹ See, e.g., J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers* 81–119 (2000); J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* 258–65 (2004); R. Wilkins, *Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism* (2001); G. Wills, "Negro President": *Jefferson and the Slave Power* (2003).

¹² My argument here is not directed at slavery whenever and wherever it has appeared, for example, in classical Greece or among Muslim nations. I am concerned in particular with American slavery, but much of what I argue extends back more broadly to the European attitude toward indigenous populations and forward to continuing manifestations of racism. For Europeans and Americans, the problem is that of reconciling Christian ideas of equality and dignity with the practice of subordination.

¹³ Jefferson's most eloquent expression of his own sense of shame before the unnaturalness of slavery is found in the famous passage from *Notes on Virginia*: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever." Query XVIII, at 163 (W. Peden, ed. 1982).

product of labor. The blackness of the slave served as a kind of natural marker of this state not just of difference but of shame. The slave's nature was to display shame. If his being is shameful, his value is as pure labor. Apart from labor, the slave exists only as a negative. In the slave, there is a perfect match of shame and labor.

Linking shame and labor, the slave is a reminder of the fragility of labor's achievements. That fragility is apparent in three dimensions: existential, cultural, and political. Existentially, we know we are no less connected to the dying body than is the slave; culturally, we know that our finest achievements can never overcome the burden of historical decay; politically, we know that we are always vulnerable to the contingencies of war. The slave reminds us of all three: death, forgetting, and defeat.

Man feels shame when that nature he shares with animals intrudes into the human world—when he sees himself as if he has not yet "made something of himself." He feels shame, because he knows that he is ontologically incapable of making something of himself. He is no less doomed to the corruption of the flesh, despite the achievements of culture and polity, than those who preceded him. He is no less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of political power. If covering up nakedness is movement from the merely natural world to the fully human, then, conversely, stripping off clothing is movement in the opposite direction. The slave reminds each of us that the nakedness we cover up we also reveal in our daily routines with our own bodies—from eating to sleeping, and most especially, in this context, sex. Each of us is as much a slave "by nature" as we are a master, for each of us stands within an imagination framed by the double myths: man is both the image of God and the shame of nature.

This imaginative state is critical to understanding the status of the slave. It is not enough to say that the slave was considered property—a mere object—rather than a legal subject. That legal categorization was the end point of a certain way of seeing the slave; it was the product of a "social imaginary." Slavery was, moreover, always a contested category. From very early on in the age of exploration and colonization, there were some who would extend the first *Genesis* myth of moral equality to the indigenous populations discovered outside Europe. Those populations did not simply appear under the category of

slave. While it would be anachronistic to speak of a kind of multicultural imagination that respected foreign civilizations for their own achievements, Christianity was a religion of universal aspirations. Christianity proved itself compatible with slavery, but the resources were always there to contest the practice. It was not unimaginable to see the indigenous as populations open to the Christian mission of spreading the gospel and saving souls; it was not impossible to see these populations as equal to others before God and entitled to the respect that comes with equality.¹⁴ This proselytizing mission was never abandoned. The indigenous, too, could share in the body of Christ; they could be seen as the image of God.

While the indigenous populations could be seen through the framework of the Genesis myth of equality, for the most part they were not. Instead, they were seen through an appeal to the second element of the Genesis myth, for the slave powerfully presented the shame of man's nature. Because his condition was shameful—merely natural, not yet fully human—he could be treated as less than a subject. He was seen through a prism of negation: the slave was not what the master was. He lacked culture or civilization along the only dimension the master was willing to see: that of the West. The explorers themselves were often struck by the cultural achievements of the peoples they met; their cities, social organizations, and means of production are noted with wonder.¹⁵ Simultaneously they were accused of “uncivilized” behavior, meaning cannibalism, human sacrifice, nakedness, and sexual licentiousness. The issue is not what the slave was but what he represented. The space of negation—the shame of nature—represented by the slave is not an objective quality but a way of seeing that the Europeans and Americans were prepared to adopt.

Undoubtedly, the fact of forceful subjugation of the slave was known by the members of the slave-owning society. Some knew of the indigenous cultures that had been destroyed. All knew that slaves could be taught to read and to participate in civil society—even if there were doubts about the capacity for full political participation.

¹⁴ See, e.g., B. Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (N. Griffin, trans. 1992) [1552].

¹⁵ See, e.g., B. Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* 216–19 (J. Cohen, trans. 1963); S. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* 75–79 (1991).

Laws making it illegal to educate slaves are themselves testimony to the slaves' capacity to learn. All knew that slaves were taught religion; they had families; and, of course, they occupied diverse roles within the economy of production. Certainly, political and economic power went a long way toward sustaining the institution of slavery, despite Jefferson's and the nation's invocation of the first myth of Genesis in the Declaration of Independence. Still, the moral complexity here goes beyond mere hypocrisy. Those who sustained slavery may have feared a just God, but they also had to provide a moral narrative to themselves.

In his role as political revolutionary, Jefferson projected the evil of slavery onto King George. It was the king who had attacked African societies, enslaved their members, and shipped them to America. This is a specific charge in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people, who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation tither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of *infidel* powers, is the warfare of the *Christian* king of Great Britain.¹⁶

Whatever the injustice of bringing the slave trade to the colonies, by the time of the Revolution, slavery within the colonies was a well-established practice, creating a set of moral and political dilemmas quite different from those of the slave trade itself. This moral difference is reflected in the constitutional response. The international slave trade was to be gradually eliminated over twenty years; slavery as a domestic institution was protected.¹⁷ At the edge of the moral and political imagination of the postrevolutionary world was the possibility of repatriation of the slaves.¹⁸ As that disappeared as a practical

¹⁶ The passage was eliminated from the final draft. The original text was recorded by Jefferson in the autobiography he composed in 1821.

¹⁷ See U.S. Constitution amend. I, sec. 9, cl. 1; amend. IV, sec. 2, cl. 3.

¹⁸ Some slaves who fought with the British in the Revolution, for the promise of their freedom, were relocated to the Canadian maritime provinces and from there to Liberia shortly after its founding in 1821.

solution, the dilemma of what to do about the slaves overwhelmed the practical imagination. Even Lincoln, before the Civil War, could not imagine more than limiting the spread of slavery—and hoping that it would die out of its own in the southern states. Of emancipated slaves, he still entertained vague hopes for repatriation to Africa.¹⁹

Some, like Washington, released their slaves upon their own deaths. But death is the moment at which the practical, political calculus is replaced by the moral calculus of eternity—or, at least, the calculus of lasting fame.²⁰ Putting off release until death is itself an admission of the failure of the political imagination. What changes at death is not the practical possibility of imagining a multiracial society but the need to take responsibility for living in and administering such a society. It is a bit like living a luxurious life and then using one's estate to buy indulgences.

We only approach the moral complexity of the Jeffersonian position when we examine not just the fear of divine justice but, more immediate, the fear of rebellion. Like all those around him, Jefferson feared a slave rebellion: in *Notes on Virginia*, he worried that if emancipation did not come “with the consent of the masters,” it could well come “by their extirpation.” His draft of the Declaration accused the king of “exciting [slaves] to rise in arms among us, and to purchase liberty . . . by murdering the people on whom [the king] also obtruded them.” To rebel is to take up the task of political construction. One does not fear the rebellion of one's property. Subjects rebel when they react to their present state as shameful. Then, they take up the labor of creating a proper human order for themselves.

To acknowledge the possibility of a slave rebellion is implicitly to recognize the slave's humanity. This knowledge, however, appears not as a fact but as an element in a normative field: it contributes to the structure of the moral imagination. Recognizing the potential for rebellion did not push the slave owner to substitute the Genesis image of man as an image of God for that of the shame of nature. It is not plausible to believe that Jefferson, Madison, and the other founders

¹⁹ On Lincoln's ideas of repatriation even during the war, see his speech to a group of free Negroes on August 14, 1862. 5 *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* 370–75 (R. Basler, ed. 1953).

²⁰ See Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* 263–64.

who failed to characterize slavery as a violation of their own principles were simply hypocrites. Rather, they lived within the moral universe of the Fall, which sees shame in nature. On this view, the slaves' failure to take up that task of rebellion is morally shameful. In that failure, the slave confirms his own nature as less than human or as merely natural. Thus there were two sides to the moral tension. Jefferson clearly understood that slavery violated the Declaration's principles:

What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible, machine is man who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment, and death itself in vindication of his *own* liberty, and the next moment be deaf to all those motives whose power supported him through his trial, and inflict on his fellow-man a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose.²¹

Yet, strikingly, the slaves did not rise in rebellion against their condition.

The white population—whether slave owners or not—could say that they themselves would not have tolerated the conditions of slavery but would have rebelled. They could be confident in this judgment because they understood themselves to have rebelled against that condition of slavery to which the British Crown had tried to reduce the colonies.²² Revolution as a rebellion against slavery is a constant rhetorical form for the founding generation, endlessly repeated in political tracts, sermons, and public speeches.²³ A popular ballad, sung by the Sons of Liberty, repeated the line, “Parliament's voice has condemned us by law to be slaves.” Jefferson's description of King George as “tyrannical” echoed Patrick Henry's earlier speech of March 23, 1775, in which he asked, “Is life so dear and peace so sweet as to be

²¹ Quoted in D. Post “‘Words Fitly Spoken’: Thomas Jefferson, Slavery and Sally Hemings,” available at <http://www.temple.edu/lawschool/dpost/slavery.PDF> (last visited Oct. 17, 2005).

²² There is an interesting connection in this respect between Jefferson's role in the revolution and his decision to wage war against the Barbary Pirates as president. It had been the practice of the Barbary states to take prisoners who would be released for ransom or sold into slavery. This “white slavery” was again intolerable to the American self-image. See A. Shipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (1991).

²³ See A. Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image* 52–82 (1999).

purchased at the price of chains and slavery?"²⁴ Political independence had its moral foundation not only in the positive idea of freedom as self-government but equally in the negative idea that the colonists would not be slaves.

Using the language of resistance to slavery to justify their own rebellion suggests a moral distinction between their own intolerance of shame and the slave's tolerance. This is already implicit in Jefferson's observation of the American moral contradiction: the issue is not only how the revolutionaries could tolerate slavery but how the slaves could fail to rebel. Indeed, the worse the master class made the conditions of slavery, the more reassurance they had of the slave's moral failings; that is, as the conditions of servitude became more intolerable, the failure to rebel marked a greater moral failure. It was thus a reassuring, vicious circle of belief.

The moral pattern here is a kind of reverse image of Hegel's master-slave relationship. Hegel's master wins the battle for recognition with the slave but then finds that the very conditions of victory deprive him of that which he most wants: recognition from an equal subject. Hegel's myth is a story of the move from equality to inequality; it establishes, as a theoretical matter, the instability of inequality. The early Americans found themselves with an existing social practice of inequality—slavery—that needed legitimation. They found themselves already having slaves, just as individuals find themselves already having families or religious practices. Of course, these are social constructions that can be changed. First of all, however, they are social practices that require a moral narrative of legitimacy, if they are to make sense to their participants—especially to the most thoughtful among them. The master class in a slave society needed to explain and confirm this asymmetry. The narrative of revolution—or, more specifically, of a failure to revolt—operated to link political history to moral and religious belief. Rebellion would be the condition in which the slave demanded political and moral equality. The failure to rebel is read as the justification for maintaining those very conditions which, from the perspective of an autonomous subject, would justify a rebellion.

²⁴ P. Henry, Speech at the Virginia House of Delegates (March 23, 1775), reprinted in *2 Annals of America 1755–1783*, at 321 (1968).

This is a recurring political pattern: one confirms the moral failure of one's enemies—domestic or foreign—by treating them as less than human. One knows that Jews, for example, are less than human, because one can see the inhumane conditions of the concentration camp. The intolerable supports a practice of intolerance. Of course, there is always the implicit knowledge that the circle can be broken. At some point there may be a rebellion. A slave-owning society always exists with this fear. The pattern here is no different from that within familial life: women and children confirm their subordinate condition by accepting the conditions which maintain that subordination. Here, too, we know that rebellion is possible. Freud bases a theory of the emergence of civilization on just such a myth of subordination and rebellion of the children against the tyrannical patriarch. Until they rebel, they are not equal.²⁵

This does not mean that rebellion will be welcomed as a sign of a new-found equality. After all, the narrative has already legitimated inequality: rebellion against this natural inequality appears now as "unnatural." This self-confirming myth of inequality is not a matter of logic but of move and counter-move. Nevertheless, we do know that sometimes the logic of rebellion does convince. The black regiments of the Civil War did help to move the nation toward emancipation; similarly, black soldiers of the Second World War helped to bring on the second Civil Rights movement. This is the larger pattern of the postwar decolonization movement: rebellion is the condition for recognition of political equality.

This fear of rebellion distinguishes American slavery from other forms of hierarchy. Aristotle thought some people natural slaves. The appropriate response to such a hierarchy was not fear but action for the sake of the slave. Hierarchies often recognize pedagogical concerns, for example teacher to student or parent to child. Frequently, hierarchies are fluid and circumstantial, depending on temporary relationships, for example, employer to employee; others are understood to be directly beneficial, such as priest to penitent; and still others rest

²⁵ See S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 141–43 (J. Strachey, trans. 1950). The traditional tendency to see the rape victim as the shame of nature was a product of the same mythic line of thought.

on knowledge, for example, doctor to patient. American slavery was marked not just by the permanence of its inequality but by the way it created and maintained a structural condition of fear to support that inequality.

The fear of slave rebellion took a double form: fear of murder of the master and fear of rape of white women—precisely the story Freud tells of the origins of civilization.²⁶ In the American slave society, the myth of murder and rape was used not to explain a feeling of guilt that is the Freudian precondition of one's own self-subordination to law but rather to relieve the potential guilt of the master class. It was used, that is, to overcome the Jeffersonian guilt present in the implicit recognition of the injustice of slavery. These fears were an exact objectification of the moral imagination that supports slavery. Murdering the master, what Jefferson called "extirpation," is the act of political rebellion: the assertion of equal humanity by effectively going to war against the conditions of slave subordination. The master demands this rebellion by the slave as a condition of recognition and respect. Nevertheless, at the same time he fears it and acts to suppress the threat by denying the slave's humanity. But if the slave's position is a function of his nature rather than his misfortune, then he re-emerges as a sexual threat. The naked body of the slave, which represents the shame of nature, was inevitably read as the sexual body. The naked body of *Genesis* is, after all, the body that also labors in reproduction. Fear of rape, accordingly, expresses the imagination of the merely natural, that which the slave showed himself to be in his failure to revolt.²⁷

Just this fantasy of rape tells us that we are within the world of the second Genesis myth. For the sexual act bears the aggregated weight of millennia of emotional, symbolic, and mythic thought about man's fallen state. Regulating sexual access is the first object of man's labor, the very condition for the emergence of a world of work after the

²⁶ See S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 78–80 (J. Strachey, trans. 1961).

²⁷ Corresponding to the fear of rape was a fear that the white subject would "go natural," that he or she would find the truth of his own existence in the nature revealed by the slave. Access to female slaves was an element of the hidden self-knowledge of the master class. Master and slave are always reciprocal images of the suppressed truth of the other. Jefferson has much to teach us here as well.

Fall.²⁸ Violation of that ground norm is symbolic of the destruction of civilization itself. For some, sex is the point of transmission of original sin; more broadly, sexual desire reminds us that we are never all that far from the naked body. We remain tied to the body, and thus to the threat that the labor of culture can disappear in that meeting of bodies which is a necessary condition for the species to continue. When we distance ourselves from the carnal knowledge of ourselves—when we regulate sexual contact through law, morality, and social structure—that knowledge comes back at us as a fear of rape.

The slave is an object of sexual temptation—real or imagined. He or she reflects the shame of nature that extends to the slave-owner society. We know that slave women were very much the object of sexual temptation for white men. Is not the fear of rape of white women, in part, a fear that, after the Fall, women no less than men are sexual beings? If men are tempted by the slave body, why not women? Indeed, women's relationship to the sins of the body are believed to be more immediate, complex, and deeper in much of the Christian tradition. A patriarchal, slave society labors to maintain a social and political hierarchy; it does so by "naturalizing" the position of subordination. But if women are closer to nature, they are also closer to the slave. The fear of a violation of the lines of sexual access easily becomes a fear of sexual communion between the white woman and the black slave. Thus the fear of rebellion and of rape is also a fear that rebellion and rape could constitute joint action of the subordinated—women and slaves—against a slave-owning, patriarchal class.

One had to fear either the humanity of the slave or his bestiality. These correspond to the fear of murderous rebellion and rape. Either way, the fear reflected less about the genuine danger of violent rebellion and more about the self-understanding of the dominant class. At stake is the shame of nature, not the slave's but the master's. The slave who is imagined to threaten rape and murder exposes the vulnerability of the body, and thus the vulnerability of the cultural construction that would turn away from the body. Increasing the distance from the slave

²⁸ Again, for Freud, it is the origin of the incest taboo. For an alternative view linking taboo to transgression, see G. Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* 63–65 (M. Dalwood, trans. 1986).

by subjecting him to the intolerable is the analogue of the hatred directed at the beloved described in the previous chapter.

Thus the shame of the slave has a twofold root. More precisely, racism takes a double form, for the social imagination that sustained slavery continues, even after slavery's formal demise. This racism rests on the one hand, on the belief that the black man is a part of nature, not fully human, and on the other, on the belief that his shameful character is a result of his own moral failure. He brings it on himself by failing to take up the task of creating culture, the first object of which would be rebellion. Thus the status of the slave is both a fact of nature and a moral condition.²⁹ These two propositions are mutually supportive: failing to rebel, the slave shows himself to be naturally inferior. He is stripped naked, reduced to a sexual being, and then negated quite literally in a ritual of desecration that establishes an unbridgeable distance between the civilized and the shame of nature.

The danger of rape was only a fantasy projected on the victim, just as the fear of rebellion was largely only a projection. The fantasy of rape, nevertheless, often functioned as a justification for the torturous mutilation of black men, which is a pure expression of rage at the shame of nature.³⁰ It is the point where political and sexual power merge. The mutilated, lynched black man is, most especially, not that image of suffering martyrdom that defines the white man's civilization: Christ. For the master class, the black victim is at the opposite extreme. While Christ transcends the body through his suffering, the lynch victim is reduced to nothing but the naked, shameful body. He is what we might even call an "anti-Christ": nothing but the shame of nature.³¹

Slaves who did rebel by fleeing proved their own humanity in that very act—at least some would read their act this way. In fleeing, they distinguished themselves from those who remained. This, for example, was the moral narrative of escape, rebellion, and moral equality sym-

²⁹ Much the same combination of fact and failing is used to characterize the black underclass today. See, e.g., R. Hernstein & C. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1995).

³⁰ See chapter 5 below on torture.

³¹ This, of course, does not tell us how that victim was seen by the slave class. For them, the analogy to Christ was indeed available. See, e.g., L. Hughes, "Christ in Alabama" (1931) in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 143 (A. Rampersad, ed. 1994); C. Cullen, "The Black Christ" (1929) in C. Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929).

bolized by Frederick Douglass. They had freely acted, separating themselves by that action from the shame of nature. If one accepted this moral reading of flight, then the most offensive political act would be to return the escaped slave to a condition of slavery. This would change the character of slavery from a moral hierarchy to a political act of war, in which the general class of black people were declared the enemy. This moral narrative of freedom won was just the target of *Dred Scott*, which held that no black person could be a citizen of the United States regardless of his or her personal achievements. For the *Dred Scott* Court, blackness was itself a stigma beyond the capacity for repair or recovery. It marked a natural man outside the political community: "The unhappy black race were separated from the white by indelible marks, and laws long before established, and were never thought of or spoken of except as property, and when the claims of the owner or the profit of the trader were supposed to need protection."³²

The master class was in the ideologically difficult position of having to deploy that narrative of rebellion but at the same time undermine its application in instances of actual rebellion, including flight. To do so it deployed another traditional tool of ideological construction: the claim that slave rebellion was caused by "outside agitators." The threat of slave rebellion could not be seen as an expression of self-liberation but only of third-party intervention.³³ Because slaves were merely natural, they were easily misled or tempted. What might appear as rebellion could really be only an aggressive political act by those outside the immediate community. Thus the South engaged in a massive effort to suppress and expel abolitionists and even abolitionist literature.³⁴ Secession, when it came, would be seen not as the initiation of war but as a continuation of a war already engaged.³⁵

³² *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, 60 U.S. 393, 410 (1856).

³³ One example of this rejection of third-party intervention was the gag rule in the House of Representatives that prohibited consideration of the thousands of antislavery petitions sponsored by the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1836 to 1844.

³⁴ See, e.g., C. Eaton, *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South* (1964); W. Savage, *The Controversy over the Distribution of Abolition Literature 1830-1860* (1938). Southern states also tried to prohibit the presence of free blacks. See P. Finkelman, "Race and Domestic International Law in the United States," 17 *Nat'l. Black L. J.* 25, 41 (2003) ("By 1860 every southern state prohibited the migration of free blacks").

³⁵ See, e.g., the Georgia Declaration of Secession which accuses the non-slave-holding states of ten years of hostile action, which "has placed the two sections of the Union for many years past in the condition of a virtual civil war."

An individual can respond to the shame of the slave in two different ways. He can cover up the nakedness of the other or he can hold himself apart, projecting the shame of nature wholly onto the naked slave. In other words, he can extend the human world built through labor or he can narrow it. What he cannot easily do is rely on the idea that man is an image of God to counter what is perceived to be the shame of nature. Once we see that shame, there is no going back to the innocence of Eden. For this reason, the discourse of human rights, which relies on the ideal of equality, often seems curiously detached from the real world of power, hierarchy, and subordination. This moral ideal alone is not enough to deny the distinction between master and slave, autonomous subject and shame of nature. To think that it is sufficient is to fail to recognize the Jeffersonian dilemma, which begins precisely with the acknowledgment of both. Knowledge of a fundamental human equality is never completely absent; rather, it is just the starting point of the dilemma presented by the inequalities within which we find ourselves.

A three-termed state of the moral imagination characterizes a slave-owning society: first, the slave is stripped down to the merely natural; second, he is recognized as a fully human threat; and, third, he is denigrated for his moral failure to take up his own humanity. The human must be dehumanized. Suffering that dehumanization is then taken as proof of a less-than-human—a shameful—quality. Together, these three steps reconcile the two elements of *Genesis*: equality and inequality; man's divinity and his shameful nature.

This is the moral imagination not just of slavery but more broadly of racism and colonialism. We find, for example, the same imaginative construction of the other in the earliest reports of the Spanish interaction with the indigenous populations in their American possessions. These populations are first described as a part of the discovery of a new world. They are like the geography, the flora, and the fauna. They can be treated as mere objects, collected as curiosities.³⁶ Quickly they become not just curiosities but productive assets. Their existing worlds can be ignored as they are turned into beasts of labor for the material

³⁶ On Columbus's return from his first voyage, he already took back to Spain a number of Tainos along with a cargo of a variety of plant and animal species.

interests of the colonists. Yet they are not merely beasts. They are seen to have their own families, polities, and civilizations. They have their own gods, their own rulers, their own social structures. Most important, they have their own capacity for resistance. They have armies with their own loyalties and, in some instances, loyalties they are willing to betray. This combination leads the Spaniards to commit mass atrocities on this population. These atrocities are only inhumane if these are human subjects. That they are not is confirmed by their very suffering. Not the defeat but the humiliation constitutes the natural shame of the indigenous.

These actions are misunderstood if interpreted only as a practice of treating the natives as if they were mere objects upon which the Spanish could test the sharpness of their swords. Killing is not mere sport; torture and murder are designed to send a message. One does not send a message to merely natural objects. Like all atrocities since, these actions were meant to be witnessed by potential victims as well as by other victimizers. They are designed to tell the victims that it is *as if* they are mere possessions of the Spaniards, to be disposed of as they wish. At the same time the Spanish are telling one another that the indigenous peoples are not subjects. They are not subjects because "we, the Spanish, can do this to them." Master and slave are reciprocally constructed in the act of humiliation. As the conditions of repression become worse, the failure to rebel becomes greater evidence of moral failure and thus of the shame of nature. *We* never could live like that.

The pattern has remained the same with the modern terror of authoritarian regimes: terror does not just defeat, it humiliates. The subordinated are understood to affirm their position by accepting the humiliation. When they do rebel—with outside assistance or not—the construction of political inequality often collapses very quickly.³⁷ That is because the construction of the inequality of slavery just barely suppresses a recognition of equality.

³⁷ This pattern creates substantial dangers for the liberator, as the United States is learning in Iraq, for with liberation comes a need to overcome years of humiliation, that is, to overcome the shame of nature. A liberated population is more likely to be rebellious than a politically repressed population. See F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (C. Farrington, trans. 1976); A. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (H. Greenfield, trans. 1965).

The resource of Genesis one and the idea of moral equality can always be used to question the inequalities that support the idea of the shame of nature. Once that ambiguity is opened up, it is possible to invert the practices of hierarchy and subordination. This move is not an innovation of the abolitionists of the nineteenth century but has always been a possibility in the West. If the native is denigrated as merely natural because he lacks the signs of civilization, does the colonizer's action not demonstrate the same capacity for uncivilized, merely natural behavior?³⁸ Already in the early 1500s Las Casas fully worked the transformation of values, labeling the conquistadors evil and the indigenous the suffering innocent.³⁹ This is the same message that Conrad portrays in *The Heart of Darkness*, in which the colonizer "goes native," revealing the truth of the colonial enterprise to be the shame of nature. From the beginning, labor is tainted with sin.

The politics of slavery or racism erects a symbolic order that would suppress the appearance of the natural man. Metaphorically, man covers his natural self in clothes.⁴⁰ In actual political life, man is clothed with uniforms and insignia of rank, on the one hand, and with the expressions of fashion, on the other. The substantially impenetrable character of the symbolic world of the political is seen in its transformation of those sites that might otherwise most vividly express the natural self. Birth becomes the origin of political identity, if not political rank. Death becomes honorable sacrifice. Fighting becomes the expression of political strength, the construction of history, and the display of political virtue. There is no world of nature to be found within this polity. In every direction we see only more of the symbolic order, for it would be shameful were any of these activities to become merely the expression of nature. We prevent this emergence of the shame of nature in our own activities by projecting that shame completely upon an other. That other is the scapegoat, the slave, the native, the black, the enemy who threatens to remind us that beneath the

³⁸ See above at 151–52 on the instability of the terms "nature" and "culture."

³⁹ See Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Deconstruction of the Indies*.

⁴⁰ In *Genesis*, the paradigmatic "covering up" is that performed by Noah's sons, Shem and Japheth, when they carefully avoid observing their father's nakedness. Ham, who sees too much and is too much of the body, suffers his father's curse of his own son, Canaan, who will be "the lowest of slaves."

world of class, power, patriotism, and culture remains the shame of our own nature: we are born like every other animal, and we die just the same.

Corresponding to the construction of the slave as the shame of nature is the construction of a master characterized by fear and guilt. He cannot fear rebellion without implicitly acknowledging his own guilt. Evil arises as fear dominates the guilt, producing an ever-increasing repression and dehumanization. The greater the distance between master and slave, the more the master's world seems to depend on exclusion of the slave. The fear of the slave rebellion is a fear that this world will collapse. The slave states of the South claimed for themselves an especially "high" culture of honor, dignity, and tradition.

We always fear that the world in which we have invested our labor and found our meaning will be exposed as nothing but a manifestation of the Fall. We fear we will be exposed as worshipping idols, that is, as nothing at all. This fear is deeply embedded in the Adam and Eve myth. There the product of man's labor is not spoken of with the pride of achievement. This is not Hobbes describing the creation of the Leviathan, or Burke describing the cumulative labor of generations to create and maintain a civilization. Rather, it is the fear that all that we build will fall apart. Civilization is no less mortal than the subject who labors. The shame of our nature is not a condition that we leave but only one that we cover up. It remains a constant accusation that we are dust and to dust we will return.

CONCLUSION: REVOLUTION AND SLAVERY

Revolution, as Jefferson taught, is always the throwing off of those who would treat us as slaves. Ideas prove their power in a community by creating this distance from the merely natural. Jefferson and his cosigners pledge to one another "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." There is nothing natural—and so nothing shameful—about this body that bears an idea. This is the sacrificial act that founds the political order; it remains a constant possibility carried forward by the citizen's self-identification with that founding sacrifice.⁴¹ The

⁴¹ On the concept of the popular sovereign as the symbolic vehicle for this identification see chapter 5.

slave is imagined as failing to take this first step of political foundation. He is not an embodied idea at all; he remains, therefore, a part of nature.

A world built on symbols is simultaneously the strongest and the weakest of constructions, for it both founds a universe and can disappear in an instant. When we maintain that world by projecting outward the threat that nature poses to the symbolic, we create the conditions for evil, for just then we defend our own humanity by making the other less than human. We are not him. He lives a life of shame; we live a life of culture. His life has no meaning; our life is one of ultimate meaning. He is slave; we are masters. His life is bound always to that wasting asset, which is the body. Our life may not be free of death—that would claim too much—but does transform death itself into an expression of an idea. Death becomes sacrifice for honor, love, family, or nation. The master freely “pledges his life,” which is exactly the moment at which he shows himself to have overcome the shame of nature. This much Hegel got right.

This form of evil appears whenever the social order sustains its own humanity by dehumanizing the other. The more precarious a society’s own symbolic system, the more likely it is to seek support by projecting nature outside itself. Reciprocally, the more it does so, the more it places itself at risk from rebellion. Thus colonial regimes were particularly brutal. Evil feeds upon itself but not without reason. There was every reason to fear that a slave rebellion, were it to come, would indeed be a very destructive affair. Revolutionary violence, when it comes, may speak the language of universal equality, but frequently it merely inverts the locus of the shame of nature. Now the old order is recast as the shame of nature. The king must be killed to prove that he is merely human: humiliation is his due.

Thus, Louis XVI is stripped of his place in the symbolic order of the state and becomes merely citizen Louis Capet. Only in part is this an expression of political equality in the new order, for Louis, along with his spouse, Marie Antoinette, is vilified in ways that directly suggest the shame of nature. Both are the objects of pornographic representations; they are accused of crimes arising from uncontrolled desire; they

are charged with showing a kind of primitive fear in their flight.⁴² Court society is no longer the expression of culture but is recast as the natural life of predation, of the abuse of power for the ends of interest, and of uncontrolled sexuality. To cut off the head of the king is to confirm the belief that he is not just another man sharing our world. Rather, he is nothing but the shame of nature, to be expelled from the new political order. The transformation of Louis from the symbolic center of the state to the shame of nature shows the fluidity of a symbolic order structured around the antinomy of culture and nature. Louis ends his life as slave, enemy, scapegoat. He moves from Christ to Antichrist. So must every slave master have feared the rebellion of the slave, just as every tyrant fears the rebellion of the repressed. They fear, because they “know” they are guilty.

The problem, moreover, is not just one for tyrants. Louis XVI, after all, was a reformist king, and many a colonialist had the best of intentions. The shame of nature is an imaginative space, not a substantive category against which we can measure behavior.⁴³ The need to defend the symbolic order against the shame of nature works in just the same way for those who oppose revolutionary change. The conservative defense of the state is cast as an opposition to the merely natural man who would destroy civilization. Rebellion is rarely seen on its own terms as a demand for equality. It is not seen as such, for civilization itself seems to turn on maintenance of the inequality. Popular forces are denigrated as the “mob,” which is driven by passion rather than reason. Instead of proving a common humanity, rebellion is cast as undeserving greed. The fear of rape is never far behind.

Such transformations of the locus of the shame of nature are characteristic of the revolutions that follow the French revolutionary example for the next two hundred years. Revolution is not understood as political disagreement—a clash of political ideals—but rather as a confrontation between political truth and a state of nature characterized

⁴² See, e.g., R. Danton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* 225–26 (1996); M. Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution: Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI* (1993).

⁴³ President Clinton’s impeachment and vilification—also involving allegations of sex and interest—was a modern version of Louis XVI’s humiliation. Surely there were those who wanted his head. Fortunately it was a less revolutionary time.

by the predation of the ruling class. The source of that “political truth” can be an appeal to an alternative conception of nature—Genesis one remains a vibrant resource. But my point here is about the political uses of Genesis two in order to legitimate inequality and subordination. Revolutionaries strip naked the old political leadership—often the aristocracy—to reveal the hidden truth, which is that their behavior has been only the shame of nature. There is an acting out of just the vulnerability of the symbolic order that the revolutionary relies upon, yet fears. He is right to fear it, for if the traditional order can be shown to be nothing but the shame of nature, then the revolutionary order can be subject to the same charge. It remains precarious, and revolutionaries often end up victims of the violence they cultivate. The Terror becomes the shame of the Revolution. The American Revolution, for the most part, avoided the Terror. It may, however, have purchased moderation by limiting its reach. Slavery remained, and when finally it did go, the means for its removal were no less terrifying.

In American history, of course, the end of slavery hardly marks the end of this conception of the shame of nature against which the political and social order must protect itself. In the South, slavery is succeeded by Jim Crow. The Fuller Court at the turn of the century has a deep fear of rebellion by the working class.⁴⁴ This pattern of thought is not limited to political conservatives. Those who would lead the proletariat revolution of the twentieth century had no trouble identifying the aristocracy or the capitalists or both with the shame of nature. Surprisingly, we see the same conceptual form deployed by Hannah Arendt, when she writes that the people’s pursuit of the “social question”—the demand for material necessities—destroys the possibility of politics.⁴⁵ This is only another version of the shame of nature. The merely natural man is always just one step away from being treated as the slave, for slavery is the institutional expression that confirms the difference between us and them, between satisfaction with a world of symbolic meaning and the fear that that world is so intangible as to be nothing at all.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See O. Fiss, *Troubled Beginnings of the Modern State, 1888–1910* at 53–74 (1999).

⁴⁵ See H. Arendt, *On Revolution* 22–24 (1965).

⁴⁶ David Cannadine’s recent book, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (2001), describes the peculiar character of the British imagination of their empire. In the face of the social question at home—the “naturalization” of domestic politics by the rise of

The lines along which the distinction between the shame of nature and the achievement of political culture will be drawn are not predictable in the abstract. Their substantive character is the product of their deployment. We can say, however, that the deeper the faith in a symbolic order—whether revolutionary or conservative—the more its supporters will defend it against the shame of nature. This is partly a matter of drawing on the willingness of members of a community to sacrifice themselves—a pattern of belief explored in the next chapter. It is also partially a matter of making a meaningful world unimaginable apart from the continuation of this belief system. The alternative is seen as nothing but the shame of nature. This form of reasoning reaches right back to that of the slave master who is confident that he would choose death before he would be a slave.

There remains a kind of primal fear of returning to nature. Political communities combat that fear by projecting nature onto the enemy, the destruction of which will be the affirmation of their own non-natural life. Nature is not the friend of politics but its enemy. A liberal political movement that understands the end of the state to be the health and welfare of its citizens—their material well-being—is dangerously close to slipping into the mythic formation of the shame of nature.⁴⁷ The place of evil in the contemporary politics of well-being is the subject of the next chapter. The politics of well-being may have overcome the shame of nature that was the slave’s, but it has left us with just as challenging a form of evil: killing for the state. Slavery and killing are two ways of driving out the shame of nature, two ways of founding the ultimate meaning of politics by denying our own finite character.

an industrial, urban, working class—an immense amount of political energy was invested in the symbolic reconstruction of indigenous societies in the colonies. Those societies were imagined as aristocratic, hierarchical, and rural, just as England had once been. There one would find the maintenance of the truth of politics, while England was succumbing to the shame of nature. Rather than constructing the indigenous populations along the lines of race—a category of natural inferiority—they were understood within the categories of class. Class can be determined by birth, but just at that moment it can displace the merely natural from the imagination. Not even at birth—or death—is the shame of nature allowed to penetrate the symbolic order.

⁴⁷ This was Carl Schmitt’s complaint against liberalism. See C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* 60–61, 69–70 (G. Schwab, trans. 1996); see also G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (D. Heller-Boazen, trans. 1998).