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On Contending with Evil: Tzvetan Todorov's Cautionary Counsel

Tzvetan Todorov's preface to *On Human Diversity* begins with a provocative sentence: "I came to know evil during the first part of my life, when I lived in a country under Stalinist rule" (vii). Life under such rule, he later wrote, "brought about in me a visceral concern with the question of good and evil, in particular in its political guise" ("Ten Years" 3). In the remainder of his preface, Todorov explained why he was embarking upon a new path of intellectual endeavor, substantially abandoning literary theory in favor of a "hybrid" discipline of history and moral philosophy in which he would seek "to find out not only how things have been but also how they ought to be. Not one or the other, but one *and the* other" (*On Human Diversity* xi).

Todorov also announced his intention to engage his sources in a dialogue that would directly involve his own moral values. He was aware that such direct reference to one's own values and insights clashed with prevailing customs of academic discourse, which view such first-person involvement as a violation of objective and disinterested inquiry. In his own work, he nonetheless set out to eliminate the "separation between one's life and one's words, between facts and values," that remains the model for academic scholarship in the social sciences (*On Human Diversity* x).

It is important to recall how controversial Todorov's "ethical turn" and the reasons that he gave for it were in the context of the Western intellectual and scholarly world of the 1980s. His repeated and forthright use of the word "evil" challenged the cultural and moral relativism that had become a defining characteristic of that world. His equally ready recourse to the term "totalitarian," and even more his unalloyed description of totalitarian political systems as evil, went against the grain of a Western intellectual culture (particularly in the social sciences) that questioned the usefulness totalitarianism as a concept and regarded such categorical condemnation of

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communist systems in particular with suspicion. (That the Nazi regime was evil few disputed). ¹

Of course, Todorov was not alone in his concern to invest political and historical discussions with a moral dimension. He frankly acknowledged the influential role that figures such as Isaiah Berlin and Arthur Koestler had played in his own intellectual evolution (*Literature* 155-58). His ready acceptance of the need to recognize evil as a factor in human affairs and his unambiguous belief that totalitarianism was an evil system were in substantial accord with the views of Central and East European figures such as Vaclav Havel, Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. But in much of what he proposed in this ethical turn, he could anticipate that many of his Western and literary colleagues would extend him a grudging acquiescence at best, and then only if they found the political implications of his work congenial.

Evil is by no means Todorov's only concern. Indeed, his works explore a phenomenally broad range of issues and problems (although Todorov himself, contemplating his work, has the sense "of having always sought the answer to a single question: how should one live?") (Devoirs 383). But he recognizes that any meaningful exploration of human life must come to terms with the problem of evil. Thus his works since the 1980s display an abiding concern for ethical issues, for advancing arguments that can help us to sort out right from wrong in an overwhelmingly secular age. Beyond this, they display an acute sensitivity to evil as it has occurred in a variety of historical situations, and as it hovers more generally as a part of human existence.

As he embarked upon this ethical turn in his work, Todorov confronted the question of what kinds of studies would best facilitate the kind of ethical inquiry that he sought. He described the genre that he thought best suited to his goals as that of a "hybrid" of history and moral philosophy, scholarship in which he could implicate himself and his own values directly. But even within this genre his work falls into one of two distinct scholarly categories. The first is a history of thought, of ideologies and ways of thinking, in which he explores the ways in which a variety of thinkers have treated specific problems, not simply presenting their ideas but rather engaging them in a dialogue that measures their truth value and their ethical insights against his

own. This sustained dialogue is at the heart of his revitalized vision of Western humanism, which is embodied most prominently in *On Human Diversity* and *Imperfect Garden*.²

His narrative explorations of particular historical events constitute a second and quite different genre. In his hands, these "exemplary narratives" become occasions for investigating the nature and operation of evil in specific historical circumstances. Much of his analysis here has focused upon the problem of political evil in the twentieth century. He is interested in exploring not simply the ways in which individual human beings responded to such evil, but also the role that particular ideologies and modes of thought played in fostering and legitimizing such evil. In the course of examining these exemplary narratives, he advances a body of insights on how individuals as well as entire societies have acted in order to resist this evil and diminish its impact.

Over time, the problem of contending with evil came to occupy a particularly prominent position in his work. My sense is that, at the time when he initially embarked upon his ethical turn, Todorov himself did not anticipate that this would be the case. But as he began to examine the face of evil in the concentration camps of the twentieth century, the dilemmas inherent in contending with evil moved to the center of his intellectual concerns, where they remain. The insights that he develops in this regard are the subject of this article.

The Contours of Evil in Todorov's Thought

Todorov makes no attempt to develop a formal philosophical definition of evil. But he does offer abundant insights on what the term means to him, and we should consider his understanding of what evil is before exploring his insights on how we might contend with it.³

We should first note that evil is an entirely secular concept in his thinking, one that neither derives from nor requires a religious vision. As such it is something that can only emerge in our relationship with others. In hi;

¹ As Todorov would later point out, the widespread Western perception that the Nazis are "the sole incarnation of historical evil" is the result of political and moral insights peculiar to our own time and place (*Hope* 190).

² His efforts in this vein have also produced works on Rousseau (Frail Happiness) and Benjamin Constant (A Passion for Democracy) that one cannot pass over in silence.

³ For a stimulating recent study of evil in history see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.

words, "the social behavior of man is the terrain on which morality is built" (*Life in Common* 146). His humanist vision rests upon a passionate belief in the fundamental equality of all persons together with its corollary that human behavior should be judged by universal standards. He has a deep commitment to freedom as the basic human condition, and to the kind of liberal democracy and political pluralism that allow for dialogue and the free competition of ideas and institutions. Within this vision, evil consists in depriving others of their freedom without due process of law, of taking their lives or robbing them of their individual dignity, of asserting one's superiority to them, or in using them in an instrumental fashion. He seems to share Joseph Brodsky's insight that "evil takes root when one man starts to think that he is better than another" (*Less Than One* 387).

Todorov vigorously rejects any Manichean division of the world into people who are inherently good or bad. The capacity for evil, he argues, is something that all human beings share. Here he cites and clearly agrees with Alexander Solzhenitsyn's conclusion that "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart — and through all human hearts" (Solzhenitsyn II, 615, cited in *Facing 136*). He thus regards the capacity for evil as a basic dimension of human nature and, as such, a part of human existence that is ineradicable. In his words, "evil is not an accidental addition to human history that could easily be got rid of; it is tied to our very identity, and to dispense with it we would have to belong to a different species" (*Hope 283*).

The potential for evil, he points out, is also an indispensable dimension of human freedom. His own vision of human nature is neither naive nor overly optimistic, and his ethical writing rests upon the assumption that human beings will often choose evil. But the potential for evil that freedom requires is balanced, in his view, by human beings' capacity to choose the good. The very possibility of this choice is a cause for hope, in his view, and the humanist vision that he cherishes rests upon this austere optimism. Such potential for good, precisely because it can be nourished and cultivated, ascribes central importance to the role of education and moral enlightenment. Todorov's ethical vision is thus suffused with a faith in enlightenment's potential to tip humanity's moral balance in favor of the good.

Todorov's notion of evil is also one in which all are complicit to some degree. This being the case, he argues strenuously that we must first confront the evil within ourselves, constantly examining our own motives and

conscience. As he puts it, "the only chance we might have of climbing a moral rung would be to recognize the evil in ourselves and to struggle against it (*Hope* 144). No less important, in his view, is the need to resist the temptation to adopt evil means for the sake of achieving a goal that we perceive as good.

His notion of evil is also one in which good and evil are closely intertwined, and he is particularly sensitive to the ambiguity of evil itself. "The idea of an unmixed good," he writes, "strikes me as an illusion: the good always has its price, it has unpredictable and undesirable consequences that we must not allow ourselves to ignore on the pretext that the goal is noble" (*Devoirs* 305). Moreover, he insists, few if any regard themselves of their actions as evil, but rather see themselves and their works as part of some larger good. Finally, he recognizes that most moral dilemmas compel us to choose not good over evil, but the lesser of two evils. It is precisely such morally complex situations, in his view, that can provide the deepest in: into human conduct (*Devoirs* 305).

Much of what we ordinarily conceive of as evil is visited upon us from without, and Todorov's exemplary narratives address the ways in which people have responded to such external evil. The bulk of his work in this regard has been an effort to understand the kind of radical political evil that he sees as embodied most vividly (but by no means exclusively) in the totalitarian regimes and concentration camps of the twentieth century. He cites Primo Levi's oft-quoted statement by a camp guard that "here there is no why" (Hope 153), but only to point out that Levi himself spent the rest of his own life seeking to comprehend the evil he had seen and to share that understanding with others (*Hope* 124). In much the same way, Todorov himself is driven to understand and make intelligible the evil that he knew and has come to know. He readily concedes that liberal democracies are also capable of political evil, but he sees the greatest practical hope for limiting such evil in the pluralism and open debate that such democracies enshrine in law.

Todorov is principally concerned to explain why political evil occurs and to explore how the perpetrators as well as the victims of evil have acted and interpreted their own behavior. In doing so, he seeks to explore "not what people were forced to submit to, but what they sought to do — not only as perpetrators of evil, but also as fighters against evil, as resisters, and as rescuers of human lives" (*Hope* 125).

Contending with Evil: Exemplary Narratives as Cautionary Tales

What, then, are the counsels that Todorov puts forward on the subject of contending with evil? Let us begin with war, the ultimate response to evil. Todorov is not a pacifist, and freely acknowledges that "there are times when taking up arms is the only appropriate response" (Facing 201). Hitler is a case study in this regard. "From the minute it became clear that there was no other way to contain Hitler," he argues, "going to war against him became the right choice" (Facing 53). But war is a blunt instrument, and Todorov has a palpable appreciation for its murderous and often indiscriminate brutality and destruction, its unpredictable consequences, and also for the fact that "no war, not even a just war, is merciful" (Hope 259). Thus he views war as an absolutely last resort in the confrontation with evil. As a result, he devotes most of his attention to non-violent means of contending with evil, urging that "moral action can perhaps be more effective than we think" (Facing 201).

Conventional views on the question of contending with evil, as embodied in much of Western art and popular culture, tend to emphasize heroic values that make for success in war. Todorov concedes that these values are essential in wartime, but sees them as unhelpful and potentially destructive in other situations. He objects in particular to their tendency to demonize one's enemies and glorify death (whether one's own or that of one's foe). In the reflections upon specific historical situations, he challenges the appropriateness of these conventional notions in numerous ways. His critical insights in this regard are a significant aspect of his political and moral thought, and it is worth enumerating them here before turning to a more detailed examination of his counsels on contending with evil.

Perhaps the most important of these insights is that much of the evil in human affairs derives from efforts to do good. Todorov is adamant on this point, arguing that "the history of any part of the globe can provide innumerable examples of the fact that good intentions have created far more victims than evil ones" (*Hope* 196). As evidence for this, he cites the historical reality that the worst evils of the twentieth century (Hitler, Stalin and their regimes) grew out of movements that were deeply convinced of thek own virtue and dedicated to creating a better world. In short, he argues that even the best-intended efforts to contend with evil have the potential of producing even greater evil. His heightened awareness that our very efforts to do good

have the potential to make bad situations even worse imbues much of his writing on evil with a cautionary tone.⁴

A second insight that reverberates throughout his work is that, in responding to evil, we should be guided not by abstract causes, no matter how noble, but by a practical concern to improve the lives of real human beings. The totalitarian regimes that he examines imposed sacrifices on their populations in the name of abstractions such as "socialism" and "communism." But causes such as "freedom" and "democracy," where they ignore the lives and interests of real people, are no better. Even "the dream of universal goodness is itself evil," he insists, "for it puts abstract aim in the place of real people" (*Hope* 289).

Third, much of his work argues that many of the political evils in modern life (ethnic and religious strife, political corruption and unjust rule) are not susceptible to any quick or decisive remediation, and certainly not through military force applied from without. Finding effective responses to these evils, he suggests, requires unusual patience and forbearance, including a willingness to tolerate messy compromises in principle and a host of lesser evils. Fashioning strategies of contending with evil that will be less costly in human lives, and more effective in the long run, poses a challenge to our intellectual and political creativity that he urges us to embrace.

With these caveats in mind, what place does the specific problem of contending with evil occupy in his work? Todorov addresses the issue at length for the first time in *Fating the Extreme*, his study of moral behavior in Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. (It was implicit in his earlier work *The Conquest of America*, but was not the central focus of that study). Later, the moral dilemmas that resistance poses became the primary subject of *A French Tragedy*, his narrative history of civil conflict in France in 1944. The problem of moral resistance to evil was at the heart of *The Fragility of Goodness*, his analysis of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from deportation during the Nazi period. Finally, meditations on the dilemmas of contending with evil dominate *Hope and Memory*, his reflections on the twentieth century.

In most of these works he is principally concerned with the behaviors of individuals and small groups. In choosing exemplary narratives that can senrve as a basis for moral analysis, he is drawn to extreme situations that can "act as magnifying glass and allow for a clearer observation of the most somber

⁴ Memoire du Mai, Tentation du Bien, the original French tide of Hope and Memory, suggests just how central this insight is to his thinking.

sides of human conduct" (A French Tragedy xii). He chose to study moral life in the concentration camps, he tells us, not because it was superior in some way (clearly it wasn't), but "because it was more visible and thus more telling there" (Facing 43). His insights on responding to evil emerge as a commentary on particular historical situations, but he clearly seeks to derive more general applications from them. Over time, his commentaries on these responses constitute an informal but increasingly coherent set of guidelines on how (and how not) to contend with evil. What advice does he give us?

Todorov takes it for granted that we should resist evil, but how we should do this prompts caution on his part. His first counsel is, in effect, not to make things worse. Here he invokes Max Weber's "ethics of responsibility" (as opposed to an "ethics of conviction"), which charges us to consider carefully the potential consequences of our actions. What will the human cost of our resistance be, and who will pay it? Such caution is not a counsel of inaction or passivity, but a strict admonition not to act without considering practical consequences.

Overall, his interpretation of Weber's "ethics of responsibility" emphasizes qualities such as prudence, practicality, and patience. Intentions are not the criteria by which Todorov would have us evaluate responses to evil: he is first and foremost concerned with practical results. He is particularly disturbed by the easy adoption of policies whose human cost will be borne by others who are not consulted about whether they want to bear this burden or not. Where there is a price to be paid (which in extreme situations usually means losing lives), he would clearly prefer for those undertaking the resistance to be at risk themselves, if only to sober their calculations.

The very notion of making things worse presupposes a standard of measurement, and for Todorov that standard is the value of every human life. Make no mistake: Todorov is a determined advocate of freedom, and his writings do not favor resignation in the face of evil or injustice. But in confronting and contending with evil, he urges us to keep the supreme value of human life always in mind. We have already cited his criticism of heroic values for their glorification of struggle and death and its implicit demeaning of the value of life itself. Events at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly the war in Iraq, have only intensified his emphasis upon human life itself as a supreme value. It is not an absolute in his thought, as his embrace of the concept of just wars suggests, but time and again he urges the need and the possibility of developing tactics for contending with evil that are short of war.

A recurring insight in Todorov's meditations on contending with evil is his vigorous affirmation that individuals can make a difference, even in the struggle against political evil, either forestalling its effects altogether or mitigating its impact. The most dramatic instance of this in his work is the decisive role that a few Bulgarian leaders played in saving the Jews of Bulgaria from deportation to Nazi death camps. Todorov is not naive here, and recognizes that the effectiveness of individual actions on the broader political scale is contingent upon a variety of external circumstances. But the Bulgarian story is a powerful illustration of just how decisive the role of individual leaders may be (*Fragility* 27-40).

At the level of the small group (which is the focus of Todorov's attention in Facing the Extreme), the role of the individual in contending with evil can clearly be decisive. Here he emphasizes less explicit confrontation, which was suicidal in the context of the concentration camps, but the role individuals played in caring for others. The risks that individuals (and couples) assumed in rescuing strangers from arrest embody a compassion for others as well as genuine resistance to evil that he finds worthy of admiration and emulation. Throughout his work, Todorov emphasizes the importance of caring and compassion in everyday life. In the context of the concentration camps, otherwise small gestures such as sharing a piece of bread, or extending a hand to someone who had fallen, could literally save a life. Such gestures, he argues, are an important dimension of contending with evil. particularly interested in these "ordinary virtues" because of the way in which they can enrich everyday existence in general). Todorov has a special appreciation for the wonder of everyday activities and relationships, something that is at the very heart of Eloge du quotidien, his exploration of the everyday in seventeenth-century Dutch art. He urges us to keep this wonder before us even at the worst times, since we contend best with evil when we recall that it is not the only reality. He notes for example that Margarete Buber-Neumann, a camp survivor whose life and work he venerates, "did not sink into despair in the camp because she remained attentive to the signs of human goodness, however infrequent they may have been" (Hope 111).

Finally, Todorov places enormous emphasis upon the understanding of evil as a means both of enduring it and resisting it. Those who are the victims of external evil, he urges, need to understand the nature of the evil that confronts them in order to be able to contend with it effectively. He links this common-sense injunction to the argument that the very activity of seeking understanding may enhance our capacity to endure adversity. Here he draws

upon the views of Germaine Tillion, the French ethnographer and former concentration camp inmate, which he summarizes as follows: "We don't live in a vacuum but in concrete situations, which may also bring us suffering, oppression, and violence. If we understand how they work, we acquire the means to act on them; and even before we take any action, using the mind to get a grip on an event may provide relief (*Hope* 293).

For Todorov, understanding evil is even more important as a means of preventing its recurrence. He is forthright in viewing his own work as an effort to diminish the sway of evil, and the quest for understanding is at the very center of his intellectual endeavors. The study of history is vital in cultivating this understanding. History, he insists, has lessons that we must interpret. "The past requires not only that we study and know it, but also that we learn its lessons — for this simple reason: evil is not just a thing of the past" (Fragility 27). Thus the historian (or at least the moral philosopher contemplating the past) must seek to understand those lessons. Todorov recognizes that in free societies there will be ongoing debate as to just what the lessons of a particular historical experience are, and we should note his consistent emphasis upon dialogue in the pursuit of truth. He stresses the provisional and contingent nature of his conclusions precisely in order to emphasize the centrality of such dialogue (On Human Diversity 384). But history for him is a moral discipline and a legitimate source of ethical insight. While historians must be scrupulous in making their accounts of the past as rich and as truthful as possible, their work should not hesitate to call things by their real names. To invoke his own felicitous language, "impartiality does not mean neutrality" (On Human Diversity 382).⁵

Political Evil: Totalitarianism and the Concentration Camps

Much of Todorov's work on political evil focuses upon the phenomenon of totalitarianism, which he regards as "the great innovation of the twentieth century and also its greatest evil" (*Hope* 3). His analysis of totalitarianism and its defining institution — the concentration camp — compares the nature and functioning of the Nazi and Soviet regimes and explores the impacts that these regimes and their core institutions had upon both individual human beings

5 Todorov's very wording here uncannily anticipates the title of Thomas HaskelTs Objectmty is Not Neutrality. On the American historical profession's debates over the problem of objectivity in historical writing see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream. and society at large. In doing so, he seeks to comprehend how such totalitarian regimes came into existence and to convey the essence of the human experience under totalitarian rule. His work here relies on a variety of sources: a considerable body of memoir literature, the insights and analysis of liberal critics of totalitarianism, but finally in no small measure upon his own critical sense and personal experience growing up under totalitarian rule in Bulgaria.

The linking and comparison of the Nazi and Soviet experiences under the rubric of totalitarianism is controversial for numerous reasons. Many students of the Holocaust in particular insist that it is an event unique in its horror, and that any comparison with other systems (communism included) posits a moral equivalence between the two systems that is unacceptable. A number of historians have criticized Todorov severely not only for such comparison, but for his efforts to derive any positive moral lessons from the Holocaust (Langer 4-7).

Todorov, like earlier students of totalitarianism such as Hannah Arendt, finds the parallels between the systems themselves and the subjective experience of life within those systems (and their concentration camps) something that benefits from comparative analysis. At the same time, he is careful to delineate the most important ways in which the two systems differed, noting in particular that the Soviet regime, however brutal, did not have systematic murder or the extermination of a specific race as a systemic goal.

Todorov's answer to his critics, made in a general way rather than addressing individuals, overlooks their frequently serious distortion of his own arguments in order to hear and respond to their more substantive objections. He appreciates the unique and personal dimension of all individual deaths, and expresses understanding for the fact that those who mourn the dead may find any comparisons offensive. But all historical events are by definition unique, and he insists that comparison is an "indispensable tool of knowledge" if we are to learn from these experiences ("Uses and Abuses" 27). In responding to his critics, Todorov is moved to develop deeper insights into the question of how we should deal with traumatic historical memories ("Uses and Abuses," *Hope* 87-92).

6 Rousso is a recent work emphasizing the comparison of Soviet and Nazi regimes in history and memory. For a study of evolving and competing concepts of totalitarianism in Western discourse see Gleason. For Todorov, the litany of totalitarianism's offensive qualities is a lone one: its systematic assault upon the freedom and dignity of individual human beings; the party's monopoly upon political power, the mass media, and the definition of truth; its systematic mendacity in depicting reality and shaping historical memory together with its suppression of competing voices; and not least its enthusiastic embrace of coercion — intimidation and arbitrary arrest the concentration camps, and ultimately death — to implement its ideological vision. Here we should note his insistence that "concentration camps and the forms of violence that they authorized, even cultivated, were not a perversion of the totalitarian system; they were an essential part of it, its logical consequence, its condensed expression" ("Communist Camps" 129). In short, such regimes systematically violated the basic traits that define a free human being, all in the name of an abstract ideology, of protecting society against internal and external enemies defined by the regime, and in practice for the sake of consolidating the elite's own power.

Here one should note Todorov's own particular aversion not only to repression, or to the arbitrary and practically unlimited power of the state that was a fact of everyday life, but to the lie that lay at the heart of the totalitarian system in its Nazi and Stalinist variant. A sensitivity to mendacious and self-serving moralistic pronouncements remains a central feature of his own writing.

Why devote such extensive discussion to totalitarianism at the end of the twentieth century, when at least its Nazi and Soviet variants are over? For Todorov, there were two vital reasons for doing so, both involving his vision of what contending with evil requires. The first is his sense of the need to do justice to the past: to allow the voices of those repressed and silenced to be heard, to explore archives made accessible to all, and thus at least to begin a process of providing a truthful picture of what happened. (His book *Voices from the Gulag* brought the particular and horrendous experience of Bulgarian concentration camps to the attention of a Western audience while locating it in the context of the broader totalitarian experience).

There is not space here to discuss Todorov's broader ideas on the problem of history and memory, on which he has written at length (*Hope* 113-227; *Les Abus*). Here we can only note that this process of rendering justice to the past, in his view, involves recognizing and making some restitution to the victims of these regimes, but most importantly of allowing the true nature or these regimes to become part of public discussion and debate. The ultimate

goal in this regard, he argues, is "to attempt, by meditating upon the injustice of the past, to reanimate the ideal of justice" ("Communist Camps" 132).

In writing on totalitarianism, Todorov's second goal is to achieve greater understanding of just what the totalitarian system was precisely in order to prevent analogous regimes from appearing in the future. Once again, his commitment to understanding has the purpose of preventing evil's recrudescence. While recognizing that social and economic factors played an important role in bringing each of these regimes to power, his own work is primarily concerned to explore the modes of thought and ideological assumptions that, in his view, the Nazi and Soviet regimes shared.

Both regimes, he argues, focused constant attention upon enemies (internal and external, real and imagined) as a way of justifying the strict controls and repressive measures that were central to their rule. This demonization of others went hand in hand with a Manichean worldview that operated in such a way as to disarm opposition and legitimize actions that might otherwise have elicited protest. Such a Manichean worldview is not unique to totalitarian societies, as he recognizes in other contexts, but it was vital dimension of Nazi and communist ideologies alike.

Rather than discuss specific tenets of Nazi or communist ideology, Todorov draws attention to the "scientism" which he sees as their shared legitimizing foundation. He uses the term "scientism" to describe the way in which these regimes argued that their ideologies were the embodiment of scientific laws (in the first case the science of biology, in the second that of history), and therefore indisputably true. Todorov is at pains to illustrate that "scientism" — a governing ideology not open to challenge — differs from "science" itself, which can only thrive on a continuously open system debate. He argues first that "scientism" assumes a degree of transparency in the operations of the universe that is simply false. But Todorov finds "scientism" particularly abhorrent because it rejects free will and moral responsibility in favor of a scientific determinism, thereby substituting its own specious claims for those of more traditional ethics (*Hope* 19-27).

My sense is that Todorov devotes such attention to "scientism" in part because he sees it as the dimension of totalitarian ideology most likely to be resurrected as a way of bypassing ethics. He recognizes that ethical decisions are not always obvious, and that it is difficult to mobilize universal assent as to what is ethical, but the notion that there are any scientific laws to which ethics must be subordinated strikes him not simply as false but as dangerous. To the contrary, he argues, ethics is autonomous, "irreducible to science," an

independent measure of whether science is indeed serving society (On Human Diversity 23).

Political Evil: Liberal Democracies and the Problem of Armed Intervention

The aftermath of the Cold War was accompanied by an explosion of ethnic and religious conflicts in Yugoslavia and, more recently, by Al-Qaeda's bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The Yugoslavian conflicts, the horrors of which seared Western consciousness throughout the 1990s, culminated in 1999 with NATO's bombing of Serbia with the stated goal of preventing the Serbs' ethnic cleansing of the Kosovars. Immediately following September 11, the United States attacked and toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had harbored Al-Qaeda's leadership and camps. As an avowed extension of this "war on terror," the United States, Great Britain, and a number of other nations attacked Iraq in March 2003, in a preemptive war that the attackers justified by the need to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime and destroy the weapons of mass destruction Iraq had allegedly amassed.

Dismayed by Western policy both in Kosovo and Iraq, Todorov proceeded to criticize the assumptions upon which these policies were based. He regarded the slaughters in Yugoslavia as evil and had no illusions about the brutal policies of Milosevic and the Serbs. He immediately recognized the new threat that Al-Qaeda's non-state terror posed to civilized society in the West ("The New World Disorder'), and he had no sympathy for Saddam Hussein. Yet for Todorov, both the Kosovo bombing and the Iraq invasion exemplified his major argument that efforts to combat evil can themselves be the source of even greater evil.

International relations had not been a subject on which he had written at length earlier, but the nature of these military interventions and the language in which they were couched and defended convinced him that vital and fateful mistakes in judgment were being made here at the millennium. In line with his vision of the intellectual's role as one of speaking out in plain language on critical public issues, he began to register his objections. (See "The Kosovo War"; "The New World Disorder"; *Hope* 237-90; *Le Nouveau Désordre mondial*). It is interesting to note the extent to which the insights on contending with evil that he had already developed in quite different contexts proved a useful

basis for criticism in the seemingly quite different arena of international relations.

It is not possible here to rehearse the details either of these crises or of Todorov's responses to them. More important for our purposes here are the grounds on which he based his criticisms and the general nature of his arguments. First, he sensed great danger in the exclusively preponderant military position of the United States in the wake of the Cold War. To Todorov, steeped in Montesquieu, such overwhelming and unchecked military power could serve to fuel a recklessness ultimately harmful to the interests of the United States itself. In the public rhetoric of major United States officials, Todorov detected a mixture of hubris, a growing Manicheanism, and finally an increasing attachment to abstract goals that tended to ignore human realities on the ground. He was particularly disturbed by what he described as a pattern of "binary thinking" that he identified in the United States foreign policy of the 1990s, in which there seemed to be no middle ground between doing nothing (with respect to Yugoslavia, for example), and bombing those identified as aggressors. "The democracies," he urges, "are not really obliged to choose between Munich (cowardly capitulation) and Dresden (murderous bombardment)" (Le Nouveau Désordre mondial 36).

Such binary thinking, he argued, is unfortunate for practical reasons: it unnecessarily cuts short our efforts to seek out a variety of more moderate means of contending with evil. Such gradual and imperfect ways of dealing with evil do not provide any definitive triumph over evil, he concedes, but "negotiation and indirect pressure may be more effective than war" (*Hope* 279). Direct violation of a nation's sovereignty, he argues, poses dangers of its own: "Anarchy can be worse then tyranny, since anarchy replaces the tyranny of one man by the tyranny of many; and even unjust laws have the advantage of stability (*Hope* 278).

At a moral level, Todorov was dismayed by Western policymakers' readiness to accept the loss of lives (primarily that of others, many civilians) that would inevitably result from the bombing of Serbia or an invasion of Iraq. Euphemisms such as "humanitarian bombs" or "collateral damage" elicit particular scorn on his part (*Hope* 258-60). But his principle argument in both cases was a practical one: that United States policy (through NATO in the case of Kosovo, and through a "coalition of the willing" in Iraq) not only did not achieve the goals that it set for itself, but may indeed — at least in the case of Iraq — have considerably worsened the United States' own situation through the alienation of allies and, more importantly, through the mobilization of Al-

Qaeda and anti-American forces around the world on a previously unimaginable scale (*Le Nouveau Désordre mondial* 37-53). In short, the policies of the United States in Kosovo and Iraq did not embody the prudence and moderation and practical good sense that are at the core of Todorov's own vision of how best to contend with evil.⁷

Those in power in Washington, London, and Brussels during the 1990s would surely dispute the charge that their policies in Yugoslavia were as undifferentiated or bereft of creative initiatives as Todorov's emphasis upon "binary thinking" implies. Indeed, one could argue that the final decision to bomb Serbia arose from a long and frustrating engagement with Milosevic and others in an effort to bring the ethnic violence there to an end. But even if this is so, one senses that Todorov's critique of American hubris, and of the current penchant for Manichean thinking, has accurately identified traits that pose risks to the national interests of the United States and its allies (not to mention other areas), and that his insights on contending with evil have about them a wisdom that we would ignore at our peril.

Concluding Observations

In writing since his ethical turn, Todorov has articulated a vision of humanism that includes a clear and nuanced discussion of what he means by evil. In doing so, he challenges the usefulness and moral justifications of many conventional responses to evil. Contending with evil, he argues, requires that we abstain from Manichean thinking, which blinds us to our own faults, leads us into the realm of hypocrisy, and has the capacity to justify evils that we might otherwise oppose. Contending with evil demands that we step back from exclusively ethnocentric judgments in favor of universal values that we would apply to all; that we recognize that there is good and evil in all; that we constantly seek justice not only for ourselves but for others. His arguments in this regard rescue the vocabulary of moral judgment for meaningful use in secular discussions of human affairs.

The guidelines on contending with evil that Todorov outlines do not come to us as a set of hard and fast rules. The ethics of responsibility that he invokes is crucial to all of his considerations, as is his unremitting emphasis

upon the sanctity of life and the virtue of caring for others. But they do not provide us with any specific resolution of the moral (and practical) dilemmas that we ourselves may face in contending with evil: circumstances are always unique. His careful and reasoned discussion of analogous moral dilemmas, however, may enable us to see the choices and potential consequences before us more clearly, and thereby enhance our capacity to make wise decisions. His guidelines provide us with what, in another context, he refers to as "tools of thought": a vocabulary and body of insights that may be useful to us as we contend with evil in our own lives. They remind us of important rules, of barriers we should think twice before crossing.

Much that Todorov suggests is rooted in a pragmatic and conservative tradition. As he evaluates the contemporary conflicts in the world, which keep death and destruction daily before our eyes, he urges us to rely upon a core of principles and practices that he finds valorized in the works of his favorite authors, prudence, respect for one's neighbor, a profound regard for law and established customs, a spiritual generosity, and an openness to the world. His own work seeks constantly to clarify problems and bring order out of the intellectual and moral confusion that stressful times generate in such abundance.

In his writing, Todorov repeatedly uses words such as "fragile" or "frail" to describe the "goodness" or the "happiness" that human beings would like to achieve in their lives. Indeed, he has no doubt that evil will continue to exist and prosper as a part of human life. "Once introduced into public life," he writes, "evil easily perpetuates itself, whereas good is always difficult, rare, and fragile. And yet possible (fragility of Good 40). Thus he chooses to regard the "fragility of the good" and the "frailty of happiness" as reasons not for despair, but for a sober and tempered hope. In contending with evil, he emphasizes that the individual's role may be important, even decisive. He understands that this role depends upon a variety of surrounding circumstances, and that the possibilities that evil will triumph are always great. But, as his historical studies suggest, the triumph of good (or the prevention of evil's triumph in a specific circumstance) is also possible. This is an austere vision, to be sure, but also one that emphasizes the individual's freedom as well as moral responsibility.

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⁷ The dilemmas of humanitarian intervention have stimulated a burgeoning scholarly literature. See in particular Finnemore, Hoffmann, Holzerefe and Keohane, and Wheeler.

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