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Preface

My understanding of philosophic inquiry, shaped when I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago in the early 1950s, has always been Socratic. By this I mean that I have always believed that the deepest philosophic perplexities have their roots in our everyday experiences, and ought to help to illuminate these experiences. Looking back over the horrendous twentieth century, few of us would hesitate to speak of evil. Many people believe that the evils witnessed in the twentieth century exceed anything that has ever been recorded in past history. Most of us do not hesitate to speak about these extreme events – genocides, massacres, torture, terrorist attacks, the infliction of gratuitous suffering – as evil. We have an intuitive sense that there is a difference between radical evil and more common forms of immoral behavior. But when we stop to think and ask what we mean by evil and what we are really saying when we call a person, act, or event evil, our responses are frequently weak and diffuse. There is a disparity between the intense moral passion that we feel in condemning something as evil and our ability to give a conceptual account of what we mean by evil. If we turn to moral philosophy as it has been practiced in the twentieth century, we do not find much help. Moral philosophers are far more at ease talking about what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, than in speaking about evil. “Evil” appears to have been dropped from the vocabulary of most moral philosophers, even though it is still very much in evidence in our everyday experience and discourse.

This inquiry – this series of interrogations – began from the perplexity concerning the disparity between our readiness to classify and condemn phenomena as evil and the apparent lack of intellectual resources with