The ‘Problem of Evil’ in the Context of the French Enlightenment: Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire, de Sade

“The very masterpiece of philosophy would be to develop the means Providence employs to arrive at the ends she designs for man, and from this construction to deduce some rules of conduct acquainting this wretched two-footed individual with the manner wherein he must proceed along life’s thorny way, forewarned of the strange caprices of that fatality they denominate by twenty different titles, and all unavailing, for it has not yet been scanned nor defined.”

-Marquis de Sade, Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791)

“The fact that the world contains neither justice nor meaning threatens our ability both to act in the world and to understand it. The demand that the world be intelligible is a demand of practical and of theoretical reason, the ground of thought that philosophy is called to provide. The question of whether [the problem of evil] is an ethical or metaphysical problem is as unimportant as it is undecidable, for in some moments it’s hard to view as a philosophical problem at all. Stated with the right degree of generality, it is but unhappy description: this is our world. If that isn’t even a question, no wonder philosophy has been unable to give it an answer. Yet for most of its history, philosophy has been moved to try, and its repeated attempts to formulate the problem of evil are as important as its attempts to respond to it.”

-Susan Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought – An Alternative History of Philosophy (2002)

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

The ‘problem of evil’ in its most general form concerns the question of the consistency of the mere existence of ‘evil’ in the created world with the characteristics attributed to its creator. Theists recognize this problem, and every major religion has produced a theodicy, -from the Greek theos (God) and dikē (justice)-, the technical term for the attempt to understand and reconcile the relationship of God to a cosmos that comprises ‘physical, and moral evil,’ and thereby to justify the ways of God to humans. The decades preceding and following the beginning of the eighteenth century saw the ‘problem of evil’ at the center of philosophical and theological debates. Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and de Sade’s sometimes ambiguous responses toward the ‘problem of evil,’ and even religion in general are, I believe, excellent avenues to understanding the multiplicity of attitudes in the period of the Enlightenment in regard to the issues surrounding the ‘problem of evil,’ such as the question of the existence of God, the relation between human beings and God, the doctrines of providence and moral freedom, the veracity of the Bible and of faith in general, and ultimately, the divine sanction for ethical values.

For Bayle, theodicy was impossible. Christian theologians could not reconcile God’s attributes of omnipotence, justice and benevolence with the fact of ‘evil’ in a world that God has created, -and thus responsible for its conditions-, without exposing themselves to great difficulties. Indeed, if we had to find an explanation, dualism was the most rationally satisfying explanation of ‘evil’ on offer as it explains the misery of human existence, and somehow manages to reconcile the belief in the existence of a ‘good God’ with the presence of ‘evil’ or imperfection in the cosmos. For Bayle, if we do affirm God’s goodness, it can only be through an act of faith, never as the result of a rational deduction.

Bayle’s work on the ‘problem of evil’ was closely followed by Leibniz who wrote his Theodicy largely as a response to Bayle, as he feared that Bayle’s dilemma represented a crisis in religious thought because not only a philosophical problem was at stake but also the very rationale for the existence of the Christian faith. Leibniz was confident that through the use of human reason, he could offer a coherent understanding of the world in which we live and of humanity’s place in it, thus provide an adequate, even though in some way incomplete explanation to the dilemma posed by the presence of ‘evil’ in the world. For Leibniz, God’s goodness and justice can be justified logically before the ‘evil’ of the world in light of a certain understanding of how God created the world: the omnipotent and rational God created the best of all possible worlds, -metaphysically speaking that is-, hence even ‘evil’ and suffering have their rightful place in a good order; however as finite beings, we are not capable of understanding the goodness of the totality.

In Candide, Voltaire parodied Leibniz’s ‘best possible world theory’ and tried to ridicule Leibniz’s views. For Voltaire, the amount of unhappiness in the world makes it ludicrous to believe that this is the ‘best possible world.’ While, in Candide, Voltaire
does not offer an alternative solution for the ‘problem of evil,’ one truth is certain: Optimism is a false answer; while ‘evil’ is incomprehensible, any minimization is an offense against those who suffer in the world. And if human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, it is experience, not philosophical discussions that taught Candide that the potential for limited, but effective action, still lay within humanity’s grasp: Candide’s garden must be cultivated.

De Sade’s *Justine or Good Conduct Well chastised* can be read as a parody of Voltaire’s *Candide*. In his novel *Justine*, de Sade’s libertines appeal to the world’s ‘evil’ as a demonstration that belief in God’s goodness and in God’s providential care, -as traditionally conceived-, is no longer viable. Arguing the atheist’s case from the existence of ‘evil,’ de Sade will then attempt to explain ‘evil’ from a materialist and nihilistic view of the world with all its terrifying metaphysical and ethical implications. Without a supposedly perfect creator, there is no problem of trying to make sense of all the terrible things that happen in the world. There is just cause and effect and the laws of nature. There is no value-system at work behind the scenes, no force for ‘good or evil,’ and no altruistic concern for others working through the basic natural forces. For de Sade’s libertines, the ‘problem of evil’ is a liberating one: if there is no God and the material world is all that exists, human beings can free themselves from all idols, from all illusions concerning the original cause of things, and by doing so they can thus succeed in ordering and establishing the world according to their own ideas.
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Introduction

“The history of efforts to respond effectively to evils is largely a history of redefinition, amplification, modification, or subversion of inherited traditions.”

- Mark Larrimore, The Problem of Evil – A Reader (2001)

‘Evil’ has always presented a unique problem for theists, in particular those of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, because it poses a serious threat to the rational belief in the existence of the traditional biblical God, ultimately casting doubt about the validity of religious faith itself. How can the existence of imperfection, disaster, and apparently undeserved suffering in the world be reconciled with the belief that the world was created by a just, wise, good, omniscient, omnipotent, and free God? In The Many Faces of Evil, Theologian John Feinberg writes:

“Times and cultures change, but some things remain constant. People continue to suffer and to wonder how there can be an all-loving and all-powerful God who allows such evil in our world. The problems that evil creates continue to engage philosophers and theologians as well as ordinary people who experience pain and evil. There is no evidence that these problems (and thinking about them) will go away anytime soon. They continue to be a major obstacle in the way of many people believing in any kind of theism, let alone any form of traditional, evangelical Christian theism.”

Despite the differences in experience and outlook, when one is confronted with some of life’s tragedies, whether it be the brutal death of a child, the witnessing of a gruesome act, or people’s lives being ruined by the destructive effects of a natural disaster, we find ourselves at a loss just like our predecessors did and equally unable to

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1 Larrimore, Mark (Ed.), The Problem of Evil – A Reader, Blackwell Publishers, UK & USA, 2001, p.xi

provide emotionally and intellectually satisfying solutions to the problem of the existence of ‘evil’ in the world. For instance, after the 1755 earthquake and subsequent tidal wave that destroyed the city of Lisbon and several thousands of its inhabitants, people everywhere asked what had caused the disaster and many started to wonder why God allowed these events to happen. Many clerics claimed that the earthquake might have been a judgment of God upon the Portuguese. After the 2004 Asian Tsunami, despite our progress in earth sciences, the same questions were posed and divine retribution was still given as a prominent explanation for the apparently arbitrary suffering caused by the natural disaster. This kind of theological understanding of ‘evil’ being, it seems, something to which human beings easily turn to when faced with grievous and devastating physical, natural or human ‘evils.’

The rationale for this present study is the belief that the large history of the ‘problem of evil’ can hopefully throw some light on the functioning, -or malfunctioning-, of familiar ideas about ‘evil,’ and help us come to term with these hard questions such as "Why do the ‘innocent’ suffer and the ‘wicked’ flourish?" ”Why is not the world better ordered and more just?” "Why is there suffering and death at all in the universe?” “Why do we ‘do evil’?” There might be at least partial answers to these difficult universal human questions, or some insights to be found in the philosophers of the past, which might help us clarify much that is still puzzling in our contemporary ways of thinking about ‘evil,’ but also deal more adequately with debilitating life events, and keep us sane.

However, the main project of this thesis is about the ‘problem of evil’ as it was understood and wrestled with, in the context of the French Enlightenment, with particular attention being paid to the philosophies of Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire, and de
Sade. According to modern scholarship, the decades preceding and following the beginning of the eighteenth century saw the ‘problem of evil’ at the center of philosophical and theological debates; the question of the human condition and its capabilities becoming central in mid-eighteenth century when the crisis in the great metaphysical systems of the past became clear. Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and de Sade’s sometimes ambiguous responses toward the ‘problem of evil,’ and even religion in general are, I believe, excellent avenues to understanding the multiplicity of attitudes in the period of the Enlightenment in regard to the issues surrounding the ‘problem of evil,’ such as the question of the existence of God, the veracity of the Bible and of faith in general, the relation between human beings and God, the doctrines of providence and moral freedom, and ultimately, the divine sanction for ethical values.

So why did I choose to focus on late seventeenth- and eighteenth- century thinkers when trying to address the problems of today? Firstly, my belief is that even though our understanding of the nature of ‘evil’ and our formulation of the problems it poses has certainly varied from time to time, I cannot see a reason for making a sharp divide between studying the philosophies of the past and attempting to work out a philosophy for one’s own time. The primary assumption is that in many respects the philosophies of great thinkers such as Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire, and de Sade have not dated, and that even today one may gain some great insight by a careful reading of their works. It may well turn out that there are ideas to be wrested from the study of late seventeenth- and eighteenth- century thought; ideas that have perhaps become hard to identify in reflection on one’s own place and tradition, and that might be hard.

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relevant for contemporary discussion and worth trying to resuscitate. There is always
the possibility of finding a new angle or a slightly different perspective; my goal being
not to provide a final, definitive answer but to hopefully further the conversation on an
age-old problem. Indeed, as we will see, the Enlightenment value and concept of
‘humanity,’ for instance, emerges implicitly as the antonym of ‘evil,’ replacing the
tradition notion of the ‘good,’ thereby constituting what might be called an alternative
transcendental signifier to those of the Judeo-Christian tradition relied upon until that
point in time. Moreover, the Christian orthodoxy on evil, -as Job’s lot, original sin, or
God’s punishment-, is further undermined by a radical religious relativism dating more
or less from Bayle and taken further by Voltaire, and which might be seen as a
particular feature of French Enlightenment thought.4

For me the different setting is part of the interest, especially because I do find it easier
to think about a philosophical problem with some historical reference point. As much
philosophical writing is, I believe, a response to something written earlier, I will thus be
responding to what was written in a different age and culture, but with some of our
problems in mind. I do think that if we are to understand why we see the ‘problem of
evil’ as we now do, -or why, that is, we see ‘evil’ as a ‘problem’ in the first place-, it
might help us to know how we got to this point. And even though each author must be
understood as trying to make sense of some particular set of circumstances, in the
context of particular debates and challenges, the philosophical positions are
interesting quite apart from personal or historical considerations and might contribute
significantly to contemporary discussions in metaphysics, philosophical theology,

4 I would like to acknowledge here Dr David McCallam for his valuable comments.
ethics and what we might called ‘moral psychology.’ For instance, Bayle was near obsessed with the ‘problem of evil’ partly because of the circumstances of his own tragic life, and Voltaire was so disturbed by the event of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake that it caused him to doubt ‘Leibnizian optimism.’ Although I deal with these thinkers in roughly chronological order, my purpose is not to write an historical survey of what has been written about ‘evil’ since the end of the seventeenth century; I will however attempt to bring together in this project a variety of perspectives since the understanding of a text or a treatise can certainly be deepened by reading it in conjunction with the works of a philosopher’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries.

It is, it seems, difficult to justify one’s selection of certain figures, and certain works for detailed examination and one’s neglect of others. The obvious connections between these different writers was for me a great starting point for a discussion, -as Leibniz’s writing of the Theodicy was in part provoked by his ongoing dialogue with Pierre Bayle; as in Candide, Voltaire parodied Leibniz’s ‘best possible world theory’ and tried to ridicule Leibniz’s views; and de Sade’s Justine can be read as a parody of Voltaire’s Candide. And considering that Bayle, Leibniz, Voltaire and de Sade were complex human beings, whose ideas changed over time, I trust that, within the scope of this study, it was preferable to give the topic a sharper focus by limiting the discussion to a number of selected classical texts which in some way embodied a particular cultural and philosophical context, a particular angle or a particular response to the theodicy. Given my fundamental problematic, -the search for some clarity about ‘evil’ from our contemporary perspective-, the thinkers I selected have, I hope, something vital to contribute to the ongoing discourse of ‘evil,’ even when I think they are mistaken. As,
we will see, there are also aspects of their thinking that need to be criticized and even rejected, such as for instance, de Sade’s challenging ethical views.

This thesis consists of five parts, or five chapters. In the initial phase of my investigation, I am discussing the relevance of my specific area of study for today’s world; starting with personal concerns and expanding to various contemporary (and not so contemporary) approaches on the issue. Further, I am also exploring the etymology of the word ‘evil,’ the issues surrounding the use of the concept itself, and discussing the emergence of the ‘problem of evil’ as a philosophical problem. I am also offering a brief historical overview of proposed solutions to the ‘problem of physical and moral evil’ in the Western tradition as well as a brief summary of the scientific and religious worldview prior to the Enlightenment. An important and necessary step I had to take to better understand the background from which the ideas expressed by late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers emerged.

Chapter 2 is devoted to some of Pierre Bayle’s reflections and responses to the ‘problem of evil,’ and more specifically to the position of Manichaeism. Over the course of his entire life, Bayle repeatedly witnessed close-hand the cruel reality of religious intolerance and persecution; this made him very wary of dogmatism and superstition, and certainly drove him to question the possibility of reconciling the existence of an omnipotent, beneficent and infinite creator in the face of the ‘evils’ in the world. For Bayle, if we do affirm God’s goodness, it can only be through an act of faith, never as the result of a rational deduction. According to Bayle, since the belief in a single and perfect principle is incompatible with the existence of ‘evil,’ the belief in God cannot be based on reason but only on the authority of faith. Bayle denied that
any theodicy was possible, that is to say, any theory that would explain rationally how God’s omnipotence and goodness could be reconciled with the fact of ‘evil’ in the world; and much of his work, especially after 1685, was intended to demonstrate the impossibility of a rational, hence philosophical, solution to this dilemma. In this chapter, I will be specifically looking at Bayle’s controversial claim that the dualistic solutions to the ‘problem of evil’ proposed by those sects such as the Manichaeans that ascribed ‘evil’ to a rival power, because the simplest, or the best at explaining the facts of experience, was indeed the only true reasonable solution to the problem, but nonetheless fails on a priori level, since on the basis of the Scriptures (that is the claims of Divine Revelation), there is only one almighty and beneficent God, or one single unifying principle. The heart of his argument was that however mistaken the Manichaeans might in fact be, their view nevertheless appears to be borne out by everyday experience. For Bayle, the ‘pessimist,’ it was clear that the world is bad, that more ‘evil’ than good exists, and that human beings are a source of ‘evil’ and corruption. In the article “Manichees,” in the Philosophical Dictionary, he stated that the condition of humanity was one of misery and wickedness as he viewed history as nothing more nor less than a collection of the crimes and misfortunes of the human race. As we will see, Bayle was particularly brilliant at undermining all traditional attempts to solve the ‘problem of evil.’ Amongst Bayle’s most arresting ideas was the suggestion that morality was independent of religion, that atheists could be more virtuous than Christians, who were guilty of many crimes, and thus that a decent society of atheists was possible in principle. By demonstrating that nothing inevitably connected Christian belief with individual conduct, Bayle was openly asserting the independence of ethics and religion.
In chapter 3, I will be exploring the position of theism, -that is the theological and philosophical position that would recommend itself as both rationally and religiously acceptable in response to the ‘problem of evil’, as espoused by Leibniz in the Essays of Theodicy. Even though Leibniz was not French, the importance of his thought in regard to the ‘problem of evil’ and the influence of the Theodicy in France and especially in regard to Bayle and Voltaire’s ideas, make it necessary to include him within this project. Indeed, Bayle’s work on the ‘problem of evil’ was closely followed by Leibniz who wrote his Theodicy largely as a response to Bayle, as he feared that Bayle’s dilemma represented a crisis in religious thought because not only a philosophical problem was at stake but also the very rationale for the existence of the Christian faith. For the purpose of this chapter I will be mainly concentrating on Leibniz’s project of theodicy, his treatment of the question of God’s justice in regard to ‘evil’ as it is expressed in the creation of the ‘best of all possible worlds theory,’ and his adoption of the ‘consider the perfection of the whole’ approach to the dilemma of ‘evil.’ For Leibniz, the ‘problem of evil’ seemed to revolve around the following question: has God created the metaphysically best of all possible worlds? If so, then God is morally good, regardless of the amount of ‘moral’ and ‘physical evil’ in the world. If not, we will have to accept that God is ‘evil.’ Leibniz’s argument being that God’s goodness and justice can be justified logically before the ‘evils’ of the world in light of a certain understanding of how God created the world: the omnipotent and rational God created the best of all possible worlds, hence even ‘evil’ and suffering have their rightful place in a good order. However, as finite beings, we are not capable of understanding the goodness of the totality, -we can know neither all of the ‘evil’ which will ever occur nor all of the world’s good which might justify it. Ultimately, it probably can be suggested that Leibniz’s attitude was one of faith in the goodness, wisdom and
justice of God, and of belief that all actual ‘evil’ can be justified only if it is a necessary means to greater good, thus that there is no contradiction in asserting that an individual ‘evil’ or ‘the less good, in some parts’ may be connected with what is best on the whole. Leibniz kept his grounding in the Scriptural tradition. For Leibniz, the basic presupposition that was rooted in the teaching of Genesis was that, if God is the supreme Creator of all things, then everything that God creates is fundamentally good. Accordingly, this affirmation carried with it an extremely positive vision of reality; -for Leibniz, the ‘optimist,’ the world is not bad, and more good than ‘evil’ exists whereas for Bayle, the ‘pessimist,’5 the world is bad, and ‘evil’ is much more prevalent than good.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Voltaire, and more specifically to Voltaire’s Candide. In this work, Voltaire tells of the difficulties of finding happiness in a world ravaged by cruelty, violence, ambition, suffering and disappointment, and thus questions Divine Benevolence, rejects rationalism, especially the so-called philosophical ‘Optimism’ and urges practical activity. For Voltaire, if a theodicy is viewed as an undertaking with exclusively theoretical implications, it is not much help to one’s suffering. Indeed, Voltaire spoke impatiently and indignantly against the kind of theorizing which, he felt, ignored reality, had no concern for the individual and justified suffering to the point of claiming not only that God allows it but even wills it. In this chapter, I will be assessing Voltaire’s claim that the amount of unhappiness in the world makes it ludicrous to believe that this is the ‘best possible world,’ and I will also be exploring in some way the position of deism, -that is the theological and philosophical position that claims

5 I am, and will be, using the term ‘pessimist’ to qualify Bayle’s outlook in the psychological sense of a personality trait characterized by negative thinking and discouragement, and an inclination to emphasize the worst rather than the best, believing in failure rather than success.
that any supernatural source of the universe there may be is unconcerned with the fates of living things, indifferent to pain and suffering. Voltaire’s *Candide* is presented as a love story in which the reader follows Candide in his travels halfway around the world in his quest for his beloved Cunégonde; the survey of the world’s ‘evils’ is thus made possible by the experiences and adventures of the hero. Candide’s world is a world filled with catastrophes, -sometimes natural but mostly human-made-; reality is ‘bad’ but, for Voltaire, the denial of that reality and the Optimistic pretence of cheerfulness is even worse. Basically, the world contains a stupendous amount of ‘evil’ and the human condition is one of misery, so let us at least not pretend that ‘all is good,’ for that will not help us to cope with it. While, in *Candide*, Voltaire does not offer an alternative solution for the problem of the origin of ‘evil,’ one truth is certain: Optimism is a false answer; while ‘evil’ is incomprehensible, any minimization is an offense against those who suffer in the world. And if human beings are the victims of forces beyond their control, it is experience, not philosophical discussions that taught Candide that the potential for limited, but effective action, still lay within humanity’s grasp: Candide’s garden must be cultivated. Thus, for Voltaire, the point of thought is action, -even if we are limited in our ability to create our own destiny-, not the construction of inconclusive speculative systems. In response to the question of ‘evil,’ there are no adequate theoretical answers, and thus there is no possibility for rational theodicy: “Let us work without philosophizing, [...] it is the only way to make life bearable.” For Voltaire, our quest for a justification of a ‘God’ which is acceptable to the human conscience and to our powers of reason is a futile and absurd pursuit. Humankind cannot justify the ways of God. Theodicy is inherently flawed as it requires

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us to be articulate, rational and reasonable in the face of the unspeakable; as for Voltaire, words could not express the reality of the unspeakable and only trivialized the pain and suffering in the world.

In chapter 5, I will be exploring the position of atheism as expressed in de Sade’s novel Justine, or Good Conduct Well chastised (1791). In Justine, de Sade will adopt the position of atheistic materialism and moral ‘nihilism’ with all its metaphysical and ethical implications. With Voltaire the step from Christianity to ‘natural religion’ was made; with de Sade, it led further to a ‘religion of Nature’ itself, -and for de Sade, of a ‘malevolent’ Nature. In response to the ‘problem of evil,’ the Marquis de Sade opted for the position of atheism and took it to its outer limits. Indeed, in Justine, de Sade’s words describe a sense of hopelessness from the very first page; believing in the inherent ‘evil’ nature and isolation of human beings, de Sade’s Justine lives in a world where one must constantly be on guard for the next ‘monster’ in human form to round the corner and cross one’s path. Justine’s hope for the reward of a better future (in heaven if not on earth) is dismissed by de Sade and his libertines as pure fantasy and thus doomed to failure. ‘Look around,’ says de Sade, ‘a world that contains so much imperfection, injustice and intense suffering is totally at odds with the possibility of its having a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.’ There is no possibility of believing in any kind of traditional theism. In his novel Justine, de Sade’s libertines appeal to the world’s ‘evil’ as a demonstration that belief in God’s goodness and in God’s providential care, -as traditionally conceived-, is no longer viable. Arguing the atheist’s case from the existence of ‘evil,’ de Sade will then attempt to explain ‘evil’ from a materialist view of the world. In Justine, de Sade’s primary intent is to

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7 See p.182 for definition and clarification for the use of the term ‘nihilism’ in the context of de Sade’s thought.
demonstrate over and over again that there can be no God in a world where Virtue is seen to be punished every time, and Vice is rewarded. And subsequently, that theistic ideas that try to account for the world’s ‘evil’ by asserting that each and every instance of ‘evil that exists is necessary for the existence of a ‘greater good’ (or the prevention of greater ‘evil’ that God could not bring about without the ‘evil’ in question), are sophistries which can only lead to radical egotism. Without a supposedly perfect creator, there is no problem of trying to make sense of all the terrible things that happen in the world. There is just cause and effect and the laws of nature. There is no value-system at work behind the scenes, no force for ‘good or evil,’ no altruistic concern for others working through the basic natural forces. For de Sade’s libertines, the ‘problem of evil’ is a liberating one: if there is no God and the material world is all that exists, human beings can free themselves from all idols, from all illusions concerning the original cause of things, and by doing so they can thus succeed in ordering and establishing the world according to their own ideas. By inviting humanity to imagine a world without God, de Sade’s libertines offer to Justine and the readers what they see as a morally compelling vision: a world in which humanity could think and do as it pleases without having to look over its shoulder at some disapproving deity. So, this chapter deals with both the big issue of what so often seems like brutality, destructiveness, and ultimate purposelessness in the natural world, but also with ‘evil’ in the private world, with those who commit ‘evil deeds.’ Indeed, de Sade’s Justine addresses the problem of the rules of conduct in which ‘good and evil,’ ‘right and wrong’ have collapsed into purely subjective questions of pleasure and pain. De Sade’s Justine can be seen as a key text which might help us to understand more about the motives or intentions of the perpetrators of ‘radical evil.’