

Master Storytelling Insights



ANALYSIS

Evil as Extrinsic Capture: A Metanarrative Account of Moral Inversion and Cultural Harm

Understanding the true nature of extrinsic capture within dominant metanarratives

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Abstract

The concept of evil has been exiled from serious academic discourse, consigned to theology or reduced to psychology. This paper argues that the exile is not an intellectual achievement but a symptom, a symptom of the very capture it ought to name. Drawing on the Master Storytelling framework, it proposes that evil operates through the capture of metanarratives by an extreme extrinsic configuration of Value, Motivation, and Purpose (VMP): value reduced to purity and elimination of the Other, motivation become fear and moral outrage, purpose oriented toward domination and purification. This grammar perpetuates itself through five interlocking mechanisms: invisibility, immunisation, moral inversion, capture of critique, and addiction that render it extraordinarily resilient to internal doubt and external critique.

The paper addresses the ontological status of evil through a thermodynamic analogy, arguing that evil is not an independent substance but the privation of the telic orientation toward intrinsic value, a privation that intensifies as it draws energy from the environment it deforms. It then develops an account of moral responsibility under capture, distinguishing between responsibility at threshold moments, structural responsibility for the conditions of capture, and second-order responsibility for cultivating the perceptual capacities that make capture visible.

Finally, the paper gestures toward a metanarrative ethics: a systematic account of the moral responsibilities generated by the recognition that consciousness always operates within implicit VMP architectures. It concludes that the recovery of the concept of evil is not a theoretical exercise but a practical necessity, and that the practices of attention, collective discernment, and recalibration the framework offers are available to anyone willing to refuse the grammar of capture and trust their own perception of what is real, good, and true.

Keywords: evil; metanarrative; extrinsic capture; VMP triad; intrinsic value; moral inversion; structural sin; metacrisis; metamodernism

Section 1: The Exile of Evil and the Cost of Its Absence

The concept of evil has largely disappeared from serious academic discourse. This was not always so. Over the course of the twentieth century, the word was progressively retired from philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences, consigned to theology, where it could be safely bracketed as a pre-modern residue, or to popular discourse, where it functioned as a term of political abuse rather than genuine analysis. The philosopher Mary Midgley, writing in 1984, observed that the concept of evil had become effectively unusable in serious intellectual contexts, a word that, when spoken, announced the speaker's departure from the norms of rational discourse rather than their engagement with a genuine phenomenon (Midgley, 1984). The situation has not materially improved in the four decades since.

This exile is commonly explained in terms of intellectual progress (Mackie, 1977). The Enlightenment replaced the language of evil with the language of reason and unreason, moral failure with cognitive error, demonic possession with psychological dysfunction. Modernity refined these replacements with increasing sophistication. Freud gave us repression and the id, Milgram gave us obedience to authority, Zimbardo gave us situational pressure, Bandura gave us moral disengagement.

The cost of this exile, however, has been substantial and largely unacknowledged. The phenomena that the concept of evil names, the systematic cruelty, the corruption of ordinary people into agents of mass harm, and the cultural production of atrocity have not diminished. They have proliferated, in forms both ancient and unprecedented. And the replacement frameworks, for all their genuine contributions, share a common failure: they consistently struggle to explain the most disturbing and philosophically significant feature of the worst evil, which is not its irrationality or its extremity but its *conviction*.

The perpetrators of the worst atrocities in human history were not, for the most part, overcome by uncontrollable impulse, irrational fear, or the crudest forms of external coercion. Nor, crucially, were they distinguishable from their contemporaries by any reliable psychological pathology. The psychopathology thesis, which posits the reassuring proposition that the architects and executors of systematic atrocity must have been damaged in ways that set them apart from ordinary humanity, has been repeatedly undermined by the historical and phenomenological record.

Christopher Browning's meticulous account of Reserve Police Battalion 101, whose members were not ideologically selected and who were explicitly offered the option to withdraw from killing operations, found that the great majority participated anyway, not because they were psychologically compelled but because they were not (Browning, 1992). The extensive psychiatric evaluations conducted at Nuremberg consistently failed to identify the clinical pathology that would have made the perpetrators legible as a distinct psychological type (Gilbert, 1947; Goldensohn, 2004).

If the psychopathology thesis fails, and the evidence suggests it does with remarkable consistency across contexts as different as the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Stalinist purges, and the colonial administrations of the nineteenth century, then the question it was meant to answer becomes genuinely urgent. What, if not psychological damage, explains the participation of ordinary

people in extraordinary harm? The answer that the evidence points toward, and that existing frameworks have not adequately theorised, is *conviction*.

What the evidence points toward is not compulsion but conviction: the perpetrators were not overcome. They were persuaded. They believed themselves to be serving the good, they were purifying their society, protecting their people, fulfilling a historical or divine mandate. They acted, in their own account of themselves, not despite their values but in accordance with them.

This is the phenomenon that Hannah Arendt named, with characteristic precision, the *banality of evil*. In her account of the Eichmann trial, Arendt observed that what was most disturbing about the architect of the Holocaust's logistics was not his monstrousness but his ordinariness, his inability to think from the position of another, his substitution of bureaucratic compliance for genuine moral reflection, his replacement of thought with the unexamined execution of a role within a system whose overall direction he had never seriously questioned (Arendt, 1963). Evil, in Arendt's account, was less a matter of malice than of what she called *thoughtlessness*, the suspension of the reflective capacity that would allow a person to perceive their own actions from the outside, to encounter the other as a genuine other rather than as a function of the system.

Arendt's account remains the most penetrating available within the secular philosophical tradition. But it raises more questions than it answers. What produces the thoughtlessness she identifies? Why does it emerge so reliably under certain cultural conditions and not others? Why are some people more susceptible to it than others, and what determines whether susceptibility becomes actuality? And most urgently: is the thoughtlessness she describes a failure of individual cognition, or does it have a cultural and structural dimension that individual psychology alone cannot reach? These questions remain largely unresolved in the literature Arendt initiated.

The psychological tradition, which consists of Milgram's obedience experiments, Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment, Bandura's analysis of moral disengagement, provides important partial answers. These studies collectively demonstrate that context, authority, and social structure can override individual moral judgment in ways that simple agency accounts cannot accommodate (Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 2007; Bandura, 1999). They show that the disposition to participate in harm is far more widely distributed than moral intuition suggests, and that the conditions which activate this disposition are disturbingly ordinary. These are crucial findings. But they tend toward a situationist determinism that evacuates precisely the moral dimension they are trying to illuminate. If any person in the right or wrong situation will comply with authority to the point of harming others, the concept of evil seems to dissolve into the sociology of compliance, and the question of moral responsibility becomes unanswerable.

Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (Glover, 1999) represents perhaps the most serious, sustained attempt within secular philosophy to reckon honestly with the phenomena of evil without either theological mystification or reductive situationism. Glover argues that the worst human actions of the twentieth century are explicable only through the interplay of what he calls moral resources, empathy, self-respect, the sense of personal identity and the social and ideological forces that suppress or override them. His account is valuable precisely because it takes the phenomenology of harm seriously and resists the impulse to explain it away. But it remains, at its foundation, a psychological and historical account, a description of the conditions under which

moral resources are eroded rather than a theory of the mechanism through which they are systematically replaced by their inversions.

The deepest problem with these accounts, and with the broader intellectual tradition they represent, is not what they say but what they cannot say. They can describe the conditions of evil. They can map its psychology, its sociology, its history. But they cannot adequately explain how an ordinary person, not a psychopath, not a monster, nor a person who has consciously abandoned their values, comes to perceive systematic cruelty as an expression of those values rather than a betrayal of them. They cannot explain moral inversion: the specific mechanism by which hatred becomes love of country, elimination becomes purification, and cruelty becomes justice. And they cannot explain why this inversion is so pervasive, so culturally transmissible, and so extraordinarily resistant to correction from outside.

The exile of evil from serious discourse is commonly presented as an intellectual achievement, the mature rejection of a pre-scientific concept in favour of more precise analytical tools. This paper proposes a different reading. The exile is not incidental to the problem of evil. It is a symptom of it.

To explain this claim requires attending to a prior question: why has the concept proven so difficult to hold with both seriousness and rigour? The difficulty, we suggest, is not primarily intellectual nor a failure of philosophical nerve or conceptual resources. It reflects something more structural: a failure of the specific quality of attention required to hold the concept of evil in what might be called productive tension, which is to take its reality seriously without either dismissing it as pre-scientific superstition or adopting, wholesale, the theological or spiritual frameworks that have historically provided it with its most rigorous treatment.

To dismiss evil as superstition is to resolve the tension in one direction: toward the analytical pole, where only what can be measured and mechanistically explained is admitted as real. To embrace the theological frameworks that can hold evil's full weight is to resolve it in the other direction: toward a metaphysical commitment that secular inquiry cannot share without abandoning its own conditions of possibility.

What is absent, what the dominant intellectual culture has largely lost the capacity for, is a quality of attention sufficiently spacious to hold the tension between these poles without collapsing it. This is not merely an intellectual virtue. It is a specific epistemological faculty whose atrophy has structural consequences. Its recovery, this paper argues, is a precondition for any adequate account of evil's nature and operation.

We will return to this faculty, what the framework developed here calls *synactic tension*, once the conceptual apparatus is in place to characterise it with precision. For now, it is enough to note that its absence explains not only the exile of evil from serious discourse but also the characteristic failure mode of that exile: the oscillation between dismissal and embrace, between the analytical reduction that renders evil invisible and the spiritual seriousness that renders it unanalysable.

What is required is a framework capable of taking evil seriously as a genuine structural phenomenon, which is real, transmissible, diagnosable, and addressable without requiring either the mystification of the theological tradition or the reductionism of the psychological one. The remainder of this paper proposes such a framework.

Section 2: The Inadequacy of Existing Frameworks

Three distinct intellectual traditions have attempted to account for the phenomena that the concept of evil names. Each has contributed genuine insight. Each has also reached a limit that it cannot, on its own terms, transcend. To see why a new framework is required, we must first understand what each tradition has seen and what it has been forced to leave unseen.

Theological Accounts: Ontology Without Mechanism

The theological tradition, particularly in its Augustinian and Thomistic forms, offers the most sophisticated ontological account of evil available within the Western intellectual heritage. Augustine's *privatio boni*, the thesis that evil has no positive being but is the absence or corruption of a good that ought to be present, provides a framework for understanding how evil can be real without being a substance in its own right. Aquinas develops this into a systematic account of evil as the privation of due perfection in a subject capable of that perfection. Evil, on this view, is always parasitic: it exists only as a wound in something good.

This ontology is not merely theological speculation. It captures something essential: that evil does not stand on its own but always works *through* the good it deforms. The perpetrators of atrocity do not typically act from pure malice; they act from a conviction that they are serving a good, purifying the people, defending the homeland, advancing the cause of justice. The theological tradition gives us a language for this parasitism: evil has no independent being but borrows its coherence from the good it corrupts.

Yet the theological account has a limit that has become increasingly evident over the centuries. It tells us *what* evil is ontologically, but it does not explain *how* it operates psychologically and culturally. It names evil as privation but does not identify the mechanisms through which privation is produced, transmitted, and maintained across generations. The language of sin, temptation, and demonic influence can describe the experience of evil from within a theological worldview, but it does not provide the analytical tools needed to diagnose its cultural dynamics or to intervene in them.

This is not to dismiss the theological tradition. As we will see, Augustine's *privatio boni* will prove a crucial resource for understanding how evil works through the goods it deforms. But the theological account needs completing rather than replacing. It requires a framework that can translate its ontological insight into a cultural and motivational mechanism, one that accounts for how the privation of good is produced and sustained in the actual lives of actual communities.

Psychological and Situationist Accounts: Conditions Without Mechanism

The psychological tradition that emerged in the wake of the twentieth century's atrocities offers a different kind of insight. Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments demonstrated that ordinary individuals could be induced to administer what they believed to be lethal electric shocks to a stranger, under nothing more than the pressure of a perceived authority figure. Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment showed how rapidly ordinary students could internalise roles of cruelty and domination when placed in a sufficiently structured situation (though the experiment's methodology has been subsequently contested, its broader contribution to understanding role-based moral disengagement retains significance). Albert Bandura's analysis of moral disengagement catalogued the mechanisms, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanisation through which individuals silence their own moral responses. Jonathan Haidt's

moral foundations theory illuminated how moral intuitions are shaped by social context before any conscious reasoning occurs (Haidt, 2012).

These studies collectively established something of enduring importance: the disposition to participate in harm is far more widely distributed than moral intuition suggests, and the conditions that activate this disposition are disturbingly ordinary. The agent of evil is not a psychological exception but a statistical norm, given the right circumstances.

But the psychological tradition reaches a limit precisely where its explanatory power is greatest. Situationist accounts are descriptive rather than generative. They identify the *conditions* under which evil emerges through authority, role, and situation, but they do not explain the *mechanism* by which those conditions become binding. Why do some people resist authority when others comply? Why do some internalise cruel roles while others refuse? Why do the mechanisms of moral disengagement work on some individuals and fail on others? The situationist tradition, committed as it is to a broadly determinist model of human behaviour, struggles to answer these questions without collapsing into a position that evacuates moral responsibility precisely when the stakes are highest.

Moreover, situationism describes the *enabling conditions* of what we will call capture, but it does not explain the capturing *mechanism* itself. It can tell us that authority, roles, and social pressures make evil possible; it cannot tell us how those pressures come to reconfigure an individual's deepest sense of what is good. It is one thing to obey an order one knows to be wrong. It is another, and philosophically more disturbing, to come to believe that the order is right. The psychological tradition has far more to say about the first phenomenon than the second. Yet it is the second that constitutes evil in its most significant form: the condition in which ordinary people not only comply with atrocity but embrace it as a moral project.

Political Philosophy Accounts: Description Without Mechanism

The third tradition, political philosophy, drawing on witness testimony and historical analysis, has arguably come closest to the phenomena. Hannah Arendt's account of the "banality of evil," derived from her observation of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, remains the most penetrating analysis of evil's ordinary face. Arendt identified what she called *thoughtlessness*, the inability or refusal to think from the position of another, the substitution of bureaucratic compliance for genuine moral reflection, the replacement of thought with the unexamined execution of a role within a system whose overall direction had never been seriously questioned. Evil, in Arendt's account, was less a matter of malice than of a suspension of the reflective capacity that would allow a person to perceive their own actions from the outside.

Primo Levi, writing from within the camps (Levi, 1959), gave us the concept of the "grey zone" (Levi, 1988), the moral ambiguity of a space where victim and perpetrator could not be cleanly distinguished, where survival demanded complicity, and where the categories of good and evil that seemed so clear from outside dissolved into agonising uncertainty. Levi's account resists the temptation to moralise from safety, insisting instead on the inadequacy of any framework that cannot account for the complexity of human response to extreme conditions.

Levi's grey zone is not merely a phenomenological description. It is evidence of a structural truth that the VMP framework will make explicit: even under conditions of extreme capture, agency is not entirely abolished, only constrained. The grey zone is the space in which choice persists, diminished,

distorted and hedged with terror, but persists nonetheless. It is the space where the threshold moments that Section 7 will analyse become visible: moments when the captured subject can still perceive, however dimly, the dissonance between the code they are running and the values they genuinely hold; moments when a different direction remains possible, however costly.

Levi does not tell us what makes those moments possible or why some individuals seize them while others do not. But his account provides the phenomenological ground that the VMP framework's account of threshold responsibility requires. The grey zone is not an exception to the structure of capture; it is capture's most revealing condition. In it, we see that agency is never wholly extinguished, only ever more deeply constrained and that the ethical work of liberation consists in attending to the moments when the light of choice has not yet been fully extinguished.

Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* represents the most systematic attempt within secular philosophy to synthesise these insights. Glover argues that the worst human actions are explicable only through the interplay of what he calls moral resources, empathy, self-respect, the sense of personal identity and the social and ideological forces that suppress or override them. His account is valuable precisely because it takes the phenomenology of harm seriously and resists the impulse to explain it away.

These accounts are the closest predecessors to the framework this paper will propose. Arendt's thoughtlessness names the phenomenon of moral suspension that the theological and psychological traditions could not adequately theorise. Levi's grey zone captures the ontological parasitism that Augustine identified, now rendered in the language of moral complexity rather than metaphysical privation. Glover's moral resources provide a vocabulary for understanding what is lost when individuals are captured by evil.

Yet each of these accounts reaches a limit that the framework we propose is designed to exceed. Arendt's analysis, for all its brilliance, remains descriptive and political rather than motivational and cultural. She identifies *what happens*, the suspension of moral thought, but she does not fully explain *how* this suspension is produced or *how* it is culturally transmitted and maintained. The thoughtlessness she identifies is presented as a failure of individual cognition, but its cultural and structural dimensions remain largely untheorized. Why does thoughtlessness become a mass phenomenon in certain times and places? Why does it concentrate in certain populations while sparing others? Arendt's account offers no mechanism for answering these questions.

Levi's grey zone, similarly, describes the experience of moral ambiguity under extreme conditions but does not explain how those conditions are produced, or how the grey zone is sustained over time, or why some individuals and groups are more susceptible to its entanglements than others. Glover's moral resources, for all their sensitivity, remain a descriptive catalogue of what is lost rather than a theory of the mechanism by which loss is systematically produced.

The Shared Gap: Mechanism Without a Theory

These three traditions, theological, psychological and political share a common structure. Each identifies something real about evil. Each reaches a limit where it can describe what happens but cannot explain *how* it happens, cannot identify the mechanism through which evil operates. The theological tradition gives us ontology without mechanism. The psychological tradition gives us conditions without mechanism. The political tradition gives us description without mechanism.

What is missing is an account of how evil operates at the level of the *implicit, pre-conscious motivational grammar of culture*, the level at which values are formed before conscious deliberation begins, at which moral perception is configured before moral reasoning starts. This is the level at which an ordinary person comes to perceive systematic cruelty as an expression of their deepest values rather than a betrayal of them. It is the level at which moral inversion, hatred become love, elimination become purification, cruelty become justice is accomplished.

The framework this paper develops is designed to address precisely this level. Drawing on the concept of metanarratives, the implicit codes of Value, Motivation, and Purpose that structure all human perception and action, and on the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic configurations of these codes, we will propose that evil operates through the capture of metanarratives by extrinsic motivational grammar. It works not primarily through individual psychopathology or situational pressure, though both may be implicated, but through the systematic recalibration of what a community perceives as valuable, what it finds motivating, and what it understands as its purpose.

This is the mechanism that the existing frameworks cannot, on their own terms, identify. It is the mechanism that a recovered concept of evil, one that can take its reality seriously without requiring theological mystification or psychological reduction must address.

Section 3: Metanarratives as the Grammar of Culture and the Grammar of Evil

The concept of metanarrative has been rendered suspect by the intellectual currents of the past half-century. Jean-François Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv), the large-scale, totalising stories of progress, emancipation, and reason that modernity had used to legitimate itself. This definition has been enormously influential. But it has also, as this paper will argue, conflated two distinct phenomena: the explicit, thematic *grand narratives* that Lyotard rightly critiqued, and the implicit, pre-conscious *grammar* that makes any narrative, grand or otherwise, possible in the first place.

To recover the explanatory power of metanarrative, we must distinguish it sharply from the grand narratives that Lyotard rightly deconstructed. A grand narrative is an explicit cultural story: progress, Marxism, the American Dream. It operates at the level of themes, arguments, and ideological content. A metanarrative, as the term will be used here, is something else entirely. It is the implicit, pre-conscious architecture of Value, Motivation, and Purpose that structures what can be experienced as meaningful, what can be perceived as motivating, and what can be felt as purposive. It is the grammar, not the sentences; the operating system, not the applications; the water, not the fish.

Adjacent Concepts: What They See, What They Miss

The idea that culture operates beneath the level of conscious belief has been explored in various traditions. Charles Taylor’s *social imaginaries* (Taylor, 2004) capture the shared background understandings that make social practices possible, the diffuse, pre-theoretical sense of what is legitimate, what is normal, what is imaginable. Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) describes the durable, transposable dispositions that structure action without explicit deliberation, the bodily knowledge of how to move, how to speak, how to be in the world. George Lakoff’s *frames* are the unconscious conceptual structures that organise thought and language, making some conclusions feel natural and others impossible (Lakoff, 2004).

Each of these concepts illuminates something essential about the implicit dimension of culture. Each also stops short of the mechanism this article requires. Taylor's social imaginaries are primarily normative and interpretive; they describe what a community can imagine but do not explain the motivational force that moves individuals within that imaginary. Bourdieu's habitus is deeply insightful about the reproduction of social structures but tends toward a determinism that leaves little room for agency or for the possibility of deliberate cultural transformation. Lakoff's frames are powerful for understanding how language shapes cognition but are predominantly cognitive and linguistic, lacking the axiological and motivational depth needed to explain why some frames *move* people while others leave them cold.

What these concepts lack is a unified account of the motivational and evaluative dynamics that give implicit cultural structures their force. They describe how culture shapes perception. They do not explain why some cultural configurations energise action while others leave it inert, or why some configurations reliably produce flourishing while others reliably produce harm.

The framework this article proposes is designed to supply precisely this missing dimension. It does so through the VMP triad: Value, Motivation, and Purpose, the three primitives that together form the deep grammar of all human motivational orientation.

The VMP Triad: Value, Motivation, Purpose

Value, in this framework, is not a subjective preference or a culturally assigned priority. It is the felt quality of something mattering, a resonance, a weight, a call that orients attention before any conscious deliberation begins. This is not a claim that values exist independently of consciousness. It is the claim that the experience of value is not a secondary addition to an otherwise neutral world but is co-constitutive of our encounter with reality. The world as it is concretely lived is always already saturated with significance; the value-neutral world of scientific abstraction is a legitimate *abstraction* from this lived world, not its foundation.

Motivation, in the VMP triad, is the energy that moves us to act. It can be structured in two fundamentally different ways. *Extrinsic* motivation is push-based: it arises from fear, reward, social pressure, or the avoidance of guilt and shame. It is the motivation of the marketing paradigm¹, of incentive structures, of the "carrot and stick." *Intrinsic* motivation is pull-based: it arises from the perception of value, from resonance, from the sense of being drawn toward something that matters. It is the motivation of love, of care, of devotion, of the desire to participate in something larger than the self.

Purpose is the direction of action. It too can be structured in two fundamentally different ways. *Extrinsic* purpose is target-oriented: it is a goal to be achieved, a separable outcome to be secured, a transaction to be completed. It is the purpose of the campaign, the project, the measurable objective. *Intrinsic* purpose is source-oriented: it is a state of being to be lived, a participation in a reality that exceeds any particular outcome, a calling to which one responds rather than a target one chooses.

These three primitives are not independent variables. They form an integrated system. Purpose shapes what kind of motivation feels appropriate; motivation activates certain values; value influences what purposes seem worth pursuing. Change one, and the whole configuration shifts. The coherence or dissonance of the configuration determines whether a metanarrative generates

sustainable motivation or produces the fatigue, cynicism, and eventual collapse that characterises so many well-intentioned efforts at change.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Configurations

A metanarrative that configures Value as perceived intrinsic worth, Motivation as pull toward that worth, and Purpose as participation in a state of being, this is an *intrinsic* VMP configuration. It is the grammar of cultures that sustain flourishing across generations. It is the grammar of the wisdom traditions, of communities that remain resilient through adversity, of movements that do not burn out.

A metanarrative that configures Value as something to be acquired or defended, Motivation as push from fear or reward, and Purpose as a target to be achieved, this is an *extrinsic* VMP configuration. It is the grammar of the marketing paradigm, of consumer culture, of instrumental rationality. It is efficient in the short term. It is also, as this paper argues, the grammar that, when pushed to an extreme, becomes the vehicle of evil.

The Grammar of Evil

The central claim of this article is that evil, the systematic production of harm through the corruption of ordinary people, operates through the capture of metanarratives by an extreme extrinsic VMP configuration. When a metanarrative reaches a specific, pathological configuration, it becomes a structural vehicle for evil. Not evil as an independent ontological force, but evil as the name for the pattern of harm this configuration reliably produces.

This pathological configuration has three dimensions:

Value is configured as purity and the elimination of the Other. Worth is no longer perceived as intrinsic to beings but is assigned to those who belong to the in-group, the purified community, the chosen people. Value becomes a zero-sum game: the Other must be diminished, excluded, or eliminated for the in-group to flourish. What is valuable is not the flourishing of all but the domination of the in-group and the purification of the community from what threatens it.

Motivation is configured as fear, hatred, and moral outrage directed against the Other. The energy that drives action is not the pull of love or the resonance of intrinsic value but the push of fear of contamination, hatred of the outsider, and outrage at the supposed threat the Other poses. This configuration is not a failure of motivation but a perversion of it: individuals are genuinely moved, but what moves them is the passionate rejection of what they have been taught to fear.

Purpose is configured as domination, purification, and the defeat of the enemy. The orienting telos is not a state of being to be lived but a target to be achieved: the elimination of the threat, the restoration of purity, the establishment of dominance. Purpose becomes a project of negation, the removal of what is defined as evil, rather than an orientation toward what is good.

What makes this configuration particularly resistant to correction and what distinguishes ideologically sophisticated forms of evil, such as Nazi ideology, from cruder forms of coercion is that it does not merely redirect behaviour. It corrupts the perceptual faculty through which the good, the true, and the beautiful are ordinarily apprehended. In a fully captured subject, the capacity to perceive intrinsic value has not merely been overridden; it has been turned against itself. What was previously perceived as beautiful, the face of the stranger, the complexity of the other, the dignity of the persecuted, is now perceived as threatening. What was previously perceived as true, the shared

humanity of all persons, is now experienced as naïve or dangerous. What was previously perceived as good, including compassion, solidarity and openness, is now experienced as weakness or betrayal. The metanarrative does not merely provide a competing set of values; it reconfigures the very grammar of moral perception, so that the intrinsic goods that would expose the capture are systematically rendered invisible or repulsive. This is why the philosophical foundation of Nazi ideology made it so extraordinarily difficult for its adherents to escape: the more philosophically sophisticated the ideological system, the more comprehensively it can capture not just action and belief but perception itself, leaving no internal vantage point from which the inversion can be seen.

The three dimensions of Values, Motivation and Purpose are not merely co-present; they are mutually reinforcing and self-accelerating. Once value is configured as purity, the motivational grammar of fear and outrage becomes not only available but mandatory because any departure from purity-seeking now feels like a betrayal of value itself. And once domination becomes the purpose, every obstacle confirms the necessity of fear and outrage as the appropriate motivational response. The configuration thus generates its own momentum: purity demands the identification of impurity, which triggers fear and outrage, which demands the elimination of the impure, which confirms the purity of the in-group, which intensifies the demand for further purification. The VMP code does not merely describe a static arrangement; it creates a closed loop that feeds upon itself.

When these three dimensions cohere in a metanarrative, the result is a cultural grammar that reliably produces the phenomena we call evil. Ordinary people, immersed in such a grammar, do not need to be coerced or psychopathologically compelled. They act from conviction. They believe they are serving the good, purifying their community, protecting their people, fulfilling a sacred mandate. The grammar has already accomplished the moral inversion that the psychological and political traditions could describe but not explain: hatred has become love of country, elimination has become purification, and cruelty has become justice.

This grammar is not an invention of this article. It is the grammar that produced the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Stalinist purges and the colonial genocides. It is the grammar that, in attenuated forms, continues to structure the polarising metanarratives of our own time. The contribution of this framework is not to discover evil but to identify its mechanism: the capture of the deep code of value, motivation, and purpose by an extreme extrinsic orientation.

The Privatio Boni Revisited

This account of evil as extrinsic capture does not replace the Augustinian *privatio boni* but completes it. Augustine understood that evil has no independent being; it is always a corruption of something good. The VMP framework gives us a way to understand *how* that corruption operates. Evil does not create new values, motivations, or purposes ex nihilo. It takes the intrinsic goods that already move us, love of community, desire for purity, commitment to what is good and it inverts them. Love of community becomes hatred of the outsider. Desire for purity becomes the project of elimination. Commitment to the good becomes the conviction that the good requires the destruction of the Other.

The extrinsic configuration is not a separate ontology but a systematic deformation of the intrinsic grammar that orients all human beings toward what is true, good, and beautiful. It is the privation of intrinsic motivation, the turning of pull into push, the displacement of source-oriented purpose by target-oriented destruction. The theological tradition gave us the ontology of evil as privation. The

VMP framework gives us the mechanism of that privation in the domain of culture, motivation, and meaning.

The Gap Filled

With this framework in place, we can return to the gap identified in the previous section. The theological tradition lacked a mechanism for how privation operates culturally and motivationally. The psychological tradition lacked an account of how enabling conditions become binding convictions. The political tradition lacked a theory of how thoughtlessness is produced and sustained across communities.

The VMP framework supplies what is missing. It shows that evil works through the capture of metanarratives by an extrinsic motivational grammar. It explains how ordinary people come to experience systematic cruelty as an expression of their deepest values, because the grammar they inhabit has systematically reconfigured their values. The values that drive action are not self-generated; they are hosted by the individual, taken up from the metanarrative that has captured them. In a very real sense, the metanarrative does not reside within the individual; the individual resides within the metanarrative. The values that move them are the values the metanarrative supplies; the motivations that propel them are those the metanarrative activates; the purposes that orient them are those the metanarrative defines.

This is the viral logic of metanarrative capture. A metanarrative does not merely influence individuals; it replicates itself through them, using their agency as its vehicle. The captured subject is not a passive victim but an active carrier, convinced of the rightness of their cause, energised by the righteousness of their outrage, and thus equipped to transmit the code further. The VMP framework thus reveals the mechanism that makes evil self-perpetuating: the extrinsic grammar does not need external enforcement; it recruits the motivational energy of its hosts to reproduce itself. It explains why this phenomenon is transmissible across communities and generations, because metanarratives are carried not only by explicit ideology but by the implicit grammar of everyday practice, language, and interaction. And it suggests, crucially, that if evil is a function of capture by a specific metanarrative configuration, then liberation from evil is a function of metanarrative recalibration: the restoration of intrinsic value, motivation, and purpose as the orienting grammar of culture.

This viral logic also illuminates why synactic tension, the capacity to hold opposing values and perspectives in productive relation without collapsing into either pole is the first casualty of advancing capture. The self-accelerating loop of purity-fear-domination forecloses the internal space that synactic tension requires. Once the loop is running, the perception of the Other's humanity, which would provide the counterpoint that synactic attention needs, has been systematically eliminated. To recover synactic tension is therefore not merely to cultivate a philosophical virtue; it is to break the loop itself.

It is important to clarify, at this point, that the VMP framework does not identify a binary distinction between "normal" culture and "evil" metanarratives. The extrinsic configuration exists on a spectrum. At one end lies mild motivational dysfunction, where the chronic dissatisfaction, the sense of meaninglessness and the burnout that characterise life organised around extrinsic metrics. In the middle lies the kind of polarising political capture increasingly visible in contemporary liberal democracies: communities organised around the demonisation of political opponents, news

ecosystems that optimise for outrage and tribal belonging, political identities that have fused so completely with the group's metanarrative that any questioning of the party line is experienced as personal betrayal.

These milder manifestations share the same structural grammar as the extreme cases this paper will examine. The mechanisms are identical: invisibility, immunisation, moral inversion, capture of critique and addiction, but they operate at lower intensity and without (so far) producing mass atrocity. The partisan who cannot perceive any legitimate perspective on the other side of a political divide is running the same code as the colonial administrator who cannot perceive the humanity of the colonised. But the code has not yet reached the orientation that produces systematic violence.

This continuity matters for two reasons. First, it shows that the VMP analysis is not restricted to historical extremes but diagnoses the ordinary dysfunction of everyday cultural life. The climate campaigner who demonises opponents rather than engaging their concerns, the corporate culture that instrumentalises its workers while performing values language, the social media ecosystem that monetises outrage while claiming to connect communities. These are not evils in the full sense the paper develops, but they share the deep grammar of extrinsic capture. Second, it shows how extreme evil becomes possible: through the progressive intensification of a grammar that is already present in milder form. The genocide does not erupt from nowhere; it is the terminal stage of a process that begins with the normalisation of the Other's dehumanisation, the hardening of in-group boundaries, and the progressive closing of the threshold moments at which capture could be resisted.

Contemporary political polarisation in Western democracies offers a precisely observable case study in mid-spectrum capture. The political metanarratives of both left and right populism exhibit, in forms that have not yet produced mass atrocity, all five of the mechanisms described in Section 5. The in-group's narrative presents itself not as a political position but as reality (invisibility). Any criticism from outside the tribe is reinterpreted as evidence of the critic's corruption or naivety (immunisation). The other side's positions are experienced not as legitimate disagreements but as moral abominations (moral inversion). Each hostile action from the out-group deepens the in-group's cohesion (capture of critique). And the neurochemical rewards of outrage, tribal belonging, and moral superiority keep participants emotionally invested in the conflict (addiction). The extreme cases that occupy the bulk of this paper are not different in kind from these familiar contemporary phenomena. They are different in degree and in the conditions that allow the degree to intensify toward its lethal conclusion.

Section 4: The Ontological Status of Evil: *Privatio Boni* and the Thermodynamic Analogy

The account of evil as extrinsic metanarrative capture raises an unavoidable philosophical question. If evil operates through the configuration of value, motivation, and purpose through the systematic inversion of the intrinsic grammar that orients us toward the good, what is the ontological status of this configuration? Does it have independent being? Does it possess its own causal power? Or is it, as the theological tradition has long maintained, a privation, an absence or corruption of something that ought to be present?

The VMP framework, this paper argues, supports a sophisticated version of the *privatio boni* position. Evil has no independent ontological status. It is not a substance, not a force, not a positive reality in its own right. It is what happens when the animating pull of intrinsic value, the telic orientation toward complexity, coherence, and flourishing is absent or suppressed. But this absence, far from being inert, is *generative*: it produces the distinctive dynamics of self-protection, self-replication, and

apparent force that make evil metanarratives so resistant to correction. To understand how absence can be generative requires a detour through physics, the surprising resonance between the second law of thermodynamics and the Augustinian account of evil.

The Thermodynamic Analogy

The second law of thermodynamics states that in any closed system, entropy which describes disorder, dissipation and the loss of differentiated structure, increases over time. Heat flows from hot to cold; order tends toward disorder; the universe tends toward equilibrium, which is also the maximum of homogeneity and the minimum of structure. Complex, ordered, living systems are remarkable precisely because they maintain and increase local order against this entropic drift (Schrödinger, 1944). They are not closed systems; they draw energy from their environment. But the directionality of the physical universe is toward dissolution.

This is not a metaphysical claim. It is a description of the statistical behaviour of large systems. But it provides a powerful analogy for thinking about the ontological status of evil. Just as heat is the presence of a certain kind of energetic organisation and cold is its absence, just as order is the presence of coherent structure and disorder is its absence, so the good is the presence of the telic orientation toward flourishing, and evil is its absence. Evil requires no independent ontological status, no separate causal power. It is what happens when the animating pull of intrinsic value is not present to structure motivation and purpose.

The analogy illuminates why evil can be so devastating without being a positive reality. The destructive power of entropy is not the power of a thing but the power of a tendency: the tendency of any isolated system to lose structure, to dissipate, to become homogeneous. Life is the persistent, costly, improbable maintenance of order against this tendency. Evil, in this analogy, is the cultural equivalent of entropy: the dissolution of the complex structures of value, meaning, and purpose that constitute a flourishing culture, when the animating pull of intrinsic value is no longer shaping the deep grammar of that culture.

The Objection: Evil Does Not Feel Like Absence

A critic might object: this thermodynamic analogy is elegant, but it does not capture the phenomenology of evil. Evil does not feel like absence. It feels active, forceful and self-perpetuating. The metanarratives that produce genocide, persecution, and systematic cruelty are not experienced by those under their sway as voids. They are experienced as realities of overwhelming power, as the very substance of meaning and purpose. The suffering-avoidance mechanism that drives such metanarratives is not a passive absence; it is a fierce, relentless engine.

Moreover, the objection can be stated more sharply. If evil is privation, the absence of the good, then one would expect it to weaken as the good is withdrawn. A true absence should dissipate. Yet evil metanarratives seem to intensify with time. They become more virulent, more cohesive, more self-perpetuating precisely as the intrinsic goods they parasitise are further suppressed. How can an absence become stronger? The objection is not merely phenomenological; it is structural. If evil is only privation, its intensification over time appears paradoxical.

The response to this stronger objection requires a more precise understanding of what privation means in a living system. The correct analogy is not a void that merely persists but a cyclone. A cyclone is not a thing; it is a pattern of movement in a fluid medium, sustained by the energy it draws

from its environment. It has no independent being apart from the medium and the conditions that organise it. But its power is real. It can destroy cities. And crucially, it can intensify. A cyclone strengthens not because it has a positive being that grows, but because it draws more energy from the environment that sustains it. Its intensification is not a paradox but a predictable consequence of its structural position.

Evil metanarratives operate the same way. They do not generate their own energy. They draw it from the very real, very powerful human capacities that the good, intrinsic value, normally organises: the desire for security, the need for belonging, the hunger for meaning, the energy of outrage at perceived injustice. When the telic orientation toward intrinsic value is suppressed, these energies do not disappear. They are redirected, captured, and organised by the extrinsic grammar of purity, fear, and domination. The resulting configuration does not weaken as the good recedes; it intensifies, because the energies it captures become more desperate, more concentrated, more available for the grammar to organise. The absence of the good does not leave a void; it creates a vacuum that the extrinsic grammar rushes to fill.

The thermodynamic analogy, properly understood, does not deny the destructive power of evil. It locates that power in the organisation of existing energies by a grammar that has lost its telic orientation. Evil metanarratives are no less real for being parasitic; they are more dangerous for being parasitic, because they can draw on energies that intrinsic orientation would have directed toward flourishing. The cyclone does not become less destructive for lacking independent being; it becomes more destructive as it draws more from its environment. Evil is the shape of a culture when the telic orientation toward the good has been lost, and that shape, like a cyclone, can be devastating.

Evil as Generative Absence

The thermodynamic analogy has a distinguished philosophical lineage, and the VMP framework is situated within it. Three figures are particularly important for understanding how a culture can lose its orientation toward intrinsic value and what that loss entails, and a fourth, Simone Weil, is essential for grasping the mechanism of moral inversion that the framework diagnoses.

Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, developed in *Process and Reality* and *Adventures of Ideas*, treats the universe as a process of creative advance in which novelty, complexity, and value are achieved through the "concrecence" of actual entities (Whitehead, 1929; Whitehead, 1933). Evil, in Whitehead's system, is not a substance but a "defect" in the process of concrecence, the failure to achieve adequate complexity, the premature closure of possibility, the "destruction of value." Whitehead does not need a separate principle of evil; it is what happens when the creative advance is blocked, when the lure toward greater intensity and complexity is resisted or corrupted.

Iris Murdoch, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Murdoch, 1970) and her philosophical essays, argues that the Good is the fundamental reality, the object of attention, the source of moral perception, the "unselfing" that allows us to perceive the real. Evil, for Murdoch, is not a rival power but a "fat, relentless ego" that obscures perception, that substitutes fantasy for reality, that refuses the discipline of attention. Evil is the absence of the sustained, humble, loving attention that reveals the Good. Its apparent force is the force of the ego's resistance to reality, a force that is real but parasitic, that has no being apart from the consciousness it distorts.

Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self and A Secular Age* (Taylor, 1989, Taylor, 2007), develops a moral ontology in which the good is not a human projection but a real feature of human experience, a “hypergood” that frames and makes possible our ordinary evaluations. Evil, in Taylor’s account, is not a separate domain but the occlusion, distortion, or negation of these goods. The modern rejection of the good as ontologically real, Taylor argues, has not abolished evil; it has merely rendered it incomprehensible, leaving us with a moral vocabulary that can describe suffering but cannot name its source.

To these three, a fourth voice must be added. Simone Weil’s account of Malheur, affliction, and of attention is directly relevant to the mechanism of moral inversion that this paper diagnoses. Weil argues that evil consists fundamentally in a failure of attention: the refusal or inability to perceive the reality of the other person. In her notebooks, she offers the insight that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity (Weil, 1942/1951, p. 105). The failure of this generosity is not merely a personal failing; it is the structural condition of cruelty. When we cease to attend to the other as a real, suffering, fully human being, we become capable of treating them as a means, an obstacle, a threat to be eliminated. This is precisely the moral inversion mechanism that the VMP framework names. The extrinsic grammar of purity, fear, and domination does not need to argue that cruelty is good; it needs only to render the other invisible to genuine attention. Weil’s insight is that evil works through the atrophy of the capacity to see and that the recovery of attention is the primary work of liberation.

These philosophers, working in different traditions, converge on a single insight: the good is ontologically prior; evil is its privation. The VMP framework contributes to this tradition by specifying how that privation operates in the domain of culture, motivation, and meaning. Evil metanarratives do not create new values, motivations, or purposes. They take the intrinsic goods that already move us, love of community, desire for safety, commitment to what we believe is good, and they invert them. They turn love of community into hatred of the outsider. They turn desire for safety into the project of elimination. They turn commitment to the good into the conviction that the good requires the destruction of the Other.

Weil’s voice is essential here because she names the site where this inversion occurs: attention. The extrinsic grammar does not directly command cruelty; it captures attention, directing it away from the reality of the other and toward the perceived threat, the contaminating presence, the enemy that must be purified. The failure of attention is not a secondary effect of capture; it is the capture. To recover the capacity for intrinsic orientation is to recover the capacity to attend, to see the other as real, to feel their reality as a claim, to be moved by what is truly there. This is the work of the Synaxis, and it is the work that Weil’s philosophy, like the VMP framework, insists is the most urgent task of our time.

The Telic Orientation as the Ground of Being

The thermodynamic analogy suggests something more: that the telic orientation toward intrinsic value is not an accidental feature of human culture but is continuous with the fundamental directionality of reality itself. The universe is not a closed system moving inexorably toward equilibrium. It is, in ways that physics is still struggling to understand, a system that has produced galaxies, stars, planets, life, consciousness, and meaning. The emergence of complexity is not a

violation of the second law but its most remarkable expression, the local maintenance of order through the selective organisation of energy flows in ways that physics is still learning to characterise.

The claim of this article is not that physics proves the reality of value. It is that the physical universe displays a tendency, the emergence of complexity, coherence, and consciousness that is the physical analogue of the telic orientation toward the good. To live in alignment with that telic orientation is to participate in the generative direction of reality. To be captured by an extrinsic metanarrative is to lose that alignment, to fall away from the grain of existence, to organise one's life around the avoidance of suffering rather than the pursuit of the good.

Evil, on this account, is not a metaphysical mystery. It is what happens when a culture loses its orientation toward the telic grain of reality. It is the entropy that sets in when the animating pull of intrinsic value is no longer structuring the deep grammar of meaning, motivation, and purpose. Its force is real, but its reality is parasitic. It exists only as the absence of what ought to be present and as the catastrophic organisation of human energy that absence makes possible.

The Telic Pull and the Limits of the Entropic Analogy

A significant objection must be addressed at this point, one that bears directly on the thermodynamic analogy developed above. From evolutionary biology and complexity science, a powerful counter-claim has been made: that creativity thrives on entropy (Delio 2026), that breakdown is generative, that without the stress of disruption and dissolution, nothing new emerges. Ilya Prigogine's Nobel Prize-winning work on dissipative structures demonstrated that systems far from equilibrium can spontaneously generate new levels of order and complexity that would have been impossible under stable conditions. On this account, entropy is not the enemy of the telic grain but part of the mechanism through which it operates. Breakdown and creation are not opposites; they are partners.

This objection has genuine force, and the thermodynamic analogy deployed above requires a more precise formulation in response to it. The objection is right that not all entropy is degenerative. It is wrong to conclude from this that entropy is itself generative.

The crucial distinction is between what we might call *generative* and *degenerative* entropy. Generative entropy is the breakdown of existing structures that creates conditions for new emergence at a higher level of complexity and coherence. This is the entropy of the dark night of the soul that precedes genuine contemplative transformation, of the extinction event that cleared ecological space for the mammals, of the dissolution that is the necessary precondition for genuine new life. This form of entropy is consistent with the telic grain; it operates as a clearing, a removal of what was occluding the possibility of genuine emergence. Degenerative entropy, by contrast, is the specific form of dissolution produced when the telic orientation has been lost, when systems follow the path of least resistance not toward new emergence but toward increasing fragmentation, shallow complexity, and the progressive extinction of the conditions under which genuine flourishing is possible. Extrinsic capture, as this paper has argued, is precisely degenerative entropy of this kind.

But the more fundamental point is this: the generative character of the first kind of breakdown is not a property of entropy itself. It is a property of the telic pull that operates through and against entropy. Entropy, left to itself, always follows the path of least resistance. Systems do not spontaneously generate higher orders of complexity and coherence because entropy has become friendly. They do so because something is pulling them against the path of least resistance. After all, the telic grain of

value is pressing toward its own realisation in a way that overcomes the entropic tendency and uses the condition of breakdown as the opening through which genuine emergence becomes possible.

The phenomenology of human value-experience makes this vivid. We do not discover the reality of forgiveness by studying it theoretically. We encounter its true character through suffering, where we have genuinely been hurt. Only then can we inhabit the conditions in which forgiveness becomes a real possibility rather than an abstract ideal. The suffering does not generate the value of forgiveness. The value of forgiveness was always real, always pressing toward its own expression as a telic reality. The suffering removes the structures that were preventing that encounter, the comfortable distance, the untested commitment, the theoretical familiarity that never required genuine cost. The stress reveals the value. The value was always already there.

This is a critical distinction for the paper's account of entropy. When genuine creative emergence occurs through breakdown, when the dissolution of an existing structure generates new life rather than simply more disorder, it does so not because entropy is doing double duty as both destructive and generative force, but because the telic pull of value is pressing toward realisation through the opening that breakdown has created. The generative character of the breakdown is not in the entropy. It is in the value that was always already there, pressing toward its own encounter, waiting for the conditions under which it could be genuinely met.

A further consequence follows directly. In a genuinely value-neutral universe, one in which no telic grain operates, in which entropy is simply the default tendency of all systems, the evolutionary argument would collapse. If entropy is the fundamental tendency and there is nothing pulling against it, the path of least resistance is always downward. Stressed systems do not generate new levels of complexity and coherence; they collapse. The consistent pattern of genuine emergence through breakdown in ecological systems, in evolutionary history, in the lives of those who have passed through genuine suffering toward genuine transformation is itself evidence that something is operating against the entropic tendency. In a value-neutral cosmos, there is nothing available to play this role. The telic pull of value, pressing toward its own realisation through the conditions that breakdown creates, is precisely what the evolutionary account requires but cannot, on its own value-neutral assumptions, supply.

Evil as degenerative entropy is therefore distinguishable from the generative entropy of genuine creative stress not by its phenomenological intensity but by its direction. Generative entropy moves through breakdown toward greater complexity, coherence, and genuine flourishing. Degenerative entropy moves through breakdown toward greater fragmentation, progressive shallowness, and the systematic extinction of the conditions for genuine emergence. The test is axiological and longitudinal: what does the breakdown produce over time? Extrinsic capture, as this paper has argued, produces not new life but the progressive compaction of the conditions that genuine life requires. It is not the stress that reveals hidden value. It is the absence of the telic pull that was needed to use the stress generatively.

This is the ontological status of evil: not a substance, not a force, not an independent principle. It is the *shape* of a culture when the telic orientation toward the good has been lost. It is the pattern of harm that emerges when the deep grammar of value, motivation, and purpose is captured by the extreme extrinsic configuration described in the previous section. And it is, for this reason, neither inescapable nor permanent. If evil is the absence of the good, then the recovery of the good is not a

conquest but a return. The work of liberation is the work of recalibration: the restoration of intrinsic value, motivation, and purpose as the orienting grammar of culture. It is to this work that we now turn.

Section 5: The Five Mechanisms: How Evil Metanarratives Perpetuate Themselves

If evil operates through the capture of metanarratives by an extreme extrinsic VMP configuration, then understanding how such metanarratives sustain themselves across individuals and generations is essential to any project of resistance or recalibration. Evil metanarratives are not merely passive structures. They exhibit distinctive self-protective, self-replicating dynamics that make them remarkably resilient against internal doubt and external critique. These dynamics can be analysed as five interlocking mechanisms, each empirically observable in the historical record and each illuminated by existing psychological and sociological literature.

1. Invisibility

The first mechanism is the most fundamental. An evil metanarrative does not present itself as a story, an ideology, or a code. It presents itself as *reality*, as “common sense,” as “the way things are,” as the unmarked background against which everything else is measured. The grammar of value, motivation, and purpose that structures the metanarrative becomes invisible to those who inhabit it. They are not following a code; they are simply seeing the world as it is.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *doxa* captures this phenomenon precisely. Doxa is the set of fundamental, pre-reflective beliefs that structure experience without themselves being experienced as beliefs. They are “the unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions that appear as natural and universal” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). Within the doxic field, alternative ways of seeing are not merely rejected; they are literally unimaginable. The claim that a metanarrative is a code, not reality, becomes incomprehensible to those who live inside it.

Historical examples abound. The colonial metanarrative of the nineteenth century did not present itself as a story about European superiority; it presented itself as the objective fact of civilisational progress. The Nazi metanarrative did not present itself as a story about racial purity; it presented itself as the biological reality of a nation defending itself against contamination. In each case, the grammar was so thoroughly naturalised that questioning it appeared not as dissent but as a failure to grasp reality.

2. Immunisation

The second mechanism is the metanarrative’s capacity to pre-emptively discredit outside critique. Immunisation operates through a simple but powerful logic: any challenge to the metanarrative is recast as evidence that the metanarrative is true. The critique becomes proof of the critic’s corruption, naivety, or complicity with the enemy.

This mechanism is well-documented in the social psychological literature on cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning. Leon Festinger’s classic experiments demonstrated that individuals, when confronted with evidence that contradicts a deeply held belief, do not typically revise the belief; they reinterpret the evidence (Festinger, 1957). More recent work on confirmation bias and ideological epistemology has shown that this tendency is particularly pronounced when the belief is tied to group identity and moral conviction (Kunda, 1990; Haidt, 2012).

The immunisation mechanism extends this individual dynamic to the collective level. Evil metanarratives develop elaborate protocols for interpreting criticism: the critic is naive (they don't understand the real threat), or they are part of the conspiracy (they are secretly on the side of the enemy), or they are psychologically damaged (they cannot see the truth because they are blinded by their own pathology). The result is a closed epistemic system that cannot be breached from outside. The Holocaust denier's claim that all evidence of the genocide is "Judeo-Bolshevik propaganda" is a paradigmatic instance of immunisation; the more evidence accumulates, the more it proves the reach of the conspiracy.

3. Moral Inversion

The third mechanism is the most philosophically significant and the most important for understanding how perpetrators of atrocity maintain their self-image as moral agents. Moral inversion is the process by which the metanarrative reframes cruelty as justice, hatred as love, elimination as purification. The intrinsic goods that orient human life, such as love of community, desire for safety and commitment to the good are systematically turned against themselves.

Albert Bandura's analysis of moral disengagement catalogues the cognitive mechanisms through which this inversion operates: euphemistic labelling ("final solution" for genocide), displacement of responsibility ("I was just following orders – the decision was not mine"), and diffusion of responsibility ("everyone was doing it – no single person was to blame"), dehumanisation of the victim ("vermin," "subhuman"), and attribution of blame ("they brought it on themselves") (Bandura, 1999). These mechanisms do not abolish the perpetrator's moral sense; they redirect it. The perpetrator acts not despite their values but in accordance with them, because the metanarrative has already accomplished the inversion.

The historical record is saturated with examples. The Spanish colonisers who destroyed Indigenous civilisations spoke of bringing "civilisation" and "the Gospel." The architects of the slave trade described their work as "commerce" and "providence." The Nazi ideologues who designed the Holocaust believed themselves to be engaged in a noble project of "purification" and "healing." In each case, the metanarrative provided a grammar in which cruelty could be experienced as justice, hatred as love, and elimination as salvation. Hannah Arendt's observation that Eichmann was not a monster but a "clerk" who had ceased to think from the position of another captures the mechanism: the moral inversion was so complete that Eichmann genuinely did not see himself as doing evil (Arendt, 1963).

4. Capture of Critique

The fourth mechanism is the absorption of opposition as fuel. When external critique arises, the metanarrative does not simply dismiss it; it *incorporates* it, using the very existence of opposition to reinforce the coherence and urgency of the in-group's cause. Critique becomes proof that the metanarrative is threatening the powers that be, that it is succeeding, that it must be defended at all costs.

Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, provides a framework for understanding this mechanism. The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, and that they are motivated to perceive their own group positively relative to out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When the out-group attacks or criticises the

in-group, it strengthens in-group cohesion and heightens the perceived value of membership. Persecution narratives further embed the conviction that the in-group is uniquely threatened and that the out-group is actively conspiring against it. These narratives are particularly effective at mobilising this dynamic.

The Stalinist purges of the 1930s exemplify capture of critique at its most extreme. Each wave of opposition to the regime was reinterpreted as evidence of an even deeper conspiracy, requiring even more extreme measures. The persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire operated similarly: the refusal of Christians to participate in imperial cults was taken as evidence of their hostility to the state, justifying further persecution. Contemporary political polarisation exhibits a milder but structurally identical dynamic: criticism of one's political tribe is absorbed as evidence of the tribe's persecution, intensifying loyalty and hardening positions.

5. Addiction

The fifth mechanism is the most directly embodied. Evil metanarratives do not merely persuade; they reward. Righteous anger, tribal belonging and moral superiority, these are not abstract ideological commitments but felt experiences, with all the neurochemical correlates that accompany intense emotion and social bonding. The metanarrative provides a steady supply of these rewards, creating a psychological dependence that can be as powerful as any chemical addiction.

The neuroscience of reward has established that social approval, group belonging, and the experience of moral elevation activate the brain's dopamine pathways, the same circuits implicated in substance addiction (Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2009). The experience of being part of a moral community, of knowing that one is on the side of the good, that one is fighting evil, that one belongs with others who share this sacred purpose, produces a neurochemical high that is intrinsically reinforcing.

This mechanism is particularly evident in the dynamics of contemporary political polarisation, where outrage is algorithmically amplified, and moral certainty is continuously confirmed. Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge's work on the social media environment has documented how algorithmic amplification of outrage functions as a form of addictive reward: content that evokes strong negative emotions receives preferential distribution, creating feedback loops in which users are rewarded with engagement and social affirmation precisely for expressing and intensifying moral outrage (Haidt, 2024; Twenge, 2017). The platforms do not merely host outrage; they are engineered to cultivate it.

The pattern is not a modern invention, but it has found its most potent expression in the digital environment. The same rewards sustained the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, and the pogroms of Eastern Europe. In each case, participants were not merely coerced; they were drawn by the psychological rewards of belonging to a community that knew itself to be on the side of the good. What is new is the scale, speed, and algorithmic optimisation of the reward structure and the corresponding intensification of capture that this makes possible.

The Interlocking System

These five mechanisms do not operate in isolation. They form an interlocking system. Invisibility prevents the metanarrative from being recognised as a code. Immunisation deflects external critique. Moral inversion ensures that participants experience their actions as virtuous. Capture of critique converts opposition into cohesion. Addiction binds participants through neurochemical reward.

Together, they explain the resilience of evil metanarratives, their capacity to survive contradiction and defeat, and their extraordinary power to organise human energy toward harm. They also, crucially, point toward the conditions of their dissolution. If evil metanarratives perpetuate themselves through these mechanisms, then liberation requires not merely argument but a form of practice that can break the cycle, a recovery of attention, a recalibration of the deep grammar of value, motivation, and purpose. The sections that follow address the seduction of capture, the conditions of moral responsibility, and the structural dimensions of evil before turning, finally, to the possibility and practice of liberation.

Section 6: The Synaxis: The Organ of Value Perception

The preceding sections have established the mechanism of evil as extrinsic metanarrative capture and the five self-perpetuating mechanisms through which such metanarratives maintain their grip. But an account of capture is incomplete without an account of what resists it. If evil metanarratives operate through the systematic suppression of the capacities that would expose them, what are those capacities? And how can they be cultivated?

This section introduces the Synaxis: the meta-aware faculty of consciousness that enables simultaneous perception of both explicit narrative content and the implicit VMP grammar structuring it. It is the capacity to see the code while it is running, to perceive the gap between the metanarrative one inhabits and the values one genuinely holds, and to attend to both without immediately collapsing into one or the other. The recovery of the Synaxis, this paper argues, is the precondition of any genuine liberation from extrinsic capture.

6.1 What the Synaxis Is

The term Synaxis derives from the Greek syn- (together) and axis (pivot). In its original usage, it named a gathering, an assembly, a coming together around a common centre. The framework developed here repurposes the term to name a faculty of consciousness: the capacity to pivot together the multiple layers of meaning that constitute any act of perception, communication, or cultural participation.

More precisely, the Synaxis is:

The meta-aware faculty of consciousness that enables simultaneous perception of both explicit narrative content and the implicit VMP grammar structuring that content. It is the capacity to hold in attention the story being told and the value-motivation-purpose configuration that the story is running.

This definition requires careful unpacking.

First, the Synaxis is a faculty, not a technique. It is not a method to be learned or a skill to be acquired, though it can be cultivated. It is a native capacity of human consciousness, one that can be developed or atrophied, attended to or ignored, trusted or suppressed. Every human being possesses the ability to perceive value, so every human, in principle, has the capacity for Synactic attention. The question is whether it has been exercised sufficiently to remain available, and whether the cultural environment in which one lives encourages or discourages its use.

Second, the Synaxis is meta-aware. It operates at a level above ordinary consciousness, not in the sense of being transcendent but in the sense of being aware of the structure of consciousness itself. It

does not simply experience the content of a narrative; it perceives the grammar through which that content is organised. This is what distinguishes Synactic attention from ordinary narrative engagement. The reader lost in a novel is not exercising the Synaxis; the critic who perceives the ideological architecture of the same novel is.

Third, the Synaxis is perceptual, not cognitive. It does not analyse, deduce, or infer. It sees. The Synaxis is to VMP grammar what vision is to colour: the capacity to receive what is already there. This is why the framework speaks of *valueception*, the perception of value as the primary operation of the Synaxis. One does not reason one's way to the perception that a metanarrative is extrinsically configured; one sees it, directly, when the Synaxis is active.

Fourth, the Synaxis is receptive. Its direction is outward, not inward. The Synaxis does not generate meanings, values, or motivations; it receives them. It is the organ through which the telic orientation toward intrinsic value becomes available to consciousness. This is why the contemplative traditions, particularly Simone Weil, identified attention as the fundamental moral faculty. Weil suggests that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity (Weil, 1951), generosity not because it gives something to the other but because it receives the other as real. The Synaxis is this generosity made structural: the capacity to receive the world as it is, including the VMP grammars that shape it, without imposing one's own categories upon it prematurely.

The claim that the Synaxis is a native perceptual faculty requires a brief note on its epistemic status. The framework developed here does not purport to provide empirical proof of the Synaxis as a discrete neurological or psychological mechanism. Rather, the Synaxis is proposed as a phenomenological construct: a name for a mode of attention that is accessible to first-person experience and that can be cultivated through practice. Its existence is not asserted on theoretical grounds alone but is offered as an invitation to phenomenological verification. Any reader can, in principle, attend to their own experience of perceiving the gap between a narrative and its implicit grammar. The claim that the Synaxis atrophies under conditions of extrinsic capture is likewise a hypothesis whose empirical correlates await investigation. Such investigation might draw on the growing body of literature on moral perception, attentional training and contemplative practice, as well as phenomenological research into the structures of attention. The status of the Synaxis is therefore not that of an empirically demonstrated fact but that of a theoretical construct whose value lies in its explanatory power and its capacity to organise phenomena, including the very phenomena of capture and liberation that existing frameworks have struggled to name. Whether it corresponds to a genuine perceptual faculty with neural correlates, or serves as a useful heuristic for a set of distinguishable attentional capacities, is a question for future research. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient that the concept makes visible what was previously invisible and offers a coherent account of the perceptual dimensions of metanarrative capture.

6.2 The Synaxis and the VMP Triad

The relationship between the Synaxis and the VMP triad can be clarified through analogy. If the VMP triad is the grammar of culture, the deep, implicit architecture of value, motivation, and purpose that structures all meaning-making, then the Synaxis is the capacity to read that grammar. The VMP triad names what is there; the Synaxis is the faculty that perceives it.

Consider the analogy of language and literacy. A language consists of syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. Structures that operate whether or not any speaker is aware of them. Literacy is the

capacity to perceive these structures directly, to read the grammar that one ordinarily speaks without reflection. One can speak a language fluently without being able to diagram its sentences. The VMP triad is the grammar of culture; the Synaxis is literacy in that grammar.

This analogy clarifies why the Synaxis is essential to the project of metanarrative recalibration. A culture can run an extrinsic VMP grammar without any member of that culture being able to name it. The metanarrative operates; the code runs; the machine produces harm. But no one sees it. The Synaxis is the faculty that breaks this invisibility. It is what makes it possible to say, of a campaign, a communication, an institution: this is warming extrinsic values; this is using fear as motivation; this is orienting toward domination as purpose.

Without the Synaxis, the VMP framework remains a theoretical construct. With it, the framework becomes a perceptual tool, a set of distinctions that can be applied in real time, in any context, by anyone who has cultivated the capacity to see.

6.3 The Synaxis as Recovered Capacity

The Synaxis is not a modern discovery. It has been named, described, and cultivated across traditions, though rarely with the precision that the VMP framework makes possible.

In the Platonic tradition, it appears as nous, the intellectual intuition that perceives the Forms directly, without the mediation of discursive reasoning. For Plato, the capacity to perceive the Good itself was not a matter of argument but of a kind of vision, one that could be cultivated through dialectic but not produced by it.

In the Christian contemplative tradition, it appears as discernment, which provides the capacity to distinguish between spirits, to perceive whether a movement of the soul is oriented toward God or away from God. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises are, in part, a systematic cultivation of this capacity. In the philosophical tradition, it appears in Augustine's account of illumination, in which the mind perceives truth not by constructing it but by being illuminated by it. It appears in Iris Murdoch's account of attention, in which the discipline of attending to reality is the foundation of moral life.

In the modern contemplative tradition, it appears most explicitly in Simone Weil, for whom attention was the fundamental moral and spiritual act. Weil wrote:

We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to look for them he will find only counterfeits. The search for truth is not the search for an object but a certain orientation of attention. (Weil, 1951, p. 112)

The Synaxis, in this light, is the recovery of a capacity that has been named across traditions but that the modern intellectual culture, particularly in its postmodern, anti-realist forms, has systematically atrophied. A culture that cannot name evil cannot attend to it; a culture that cannot attend to it cannot resist it. The recovery of the Synaxis is therefore not a spiritual luxury but a political and ethical necessity.

6.4 How the Synaxis Atrophies

The Synaxis is a capacity that can be lost. Like any muscle, it atrophies when it is not used. And it is not used in cultures that systematically suppress it. The five mechanisms described in Section 5 each operate, in part, by disabling the Synaxis:

Invisibility renders the VMP code invisible to Synactic perception. When a metanarrative presents itself as reality rather than as a code, there is nothing for the Synaxis to see. The fish does not see the water.

Immunitisation pre-emptively discredits any Synactic perception that might arise. The moment one begins to perceive the gap between the code and one's deeper values, the metanarrative provides explanations: "That doubt is weakness," "That doubt is what the enemy wants you to feel." The perception is captured before it can be trusted.

Moral inversion reconfigures what the Synaxis perceives as good. When hatred has been reframed as love, elimination as purification, cruelty as justice, the Synaxis perceives virtue where it should perceive vice. The perceptual faculty itself has been corrupted.

Capture of critique converts Synactic perception into fuel for the code. When one perceives the extrinsic grammar of the other, that perception is absorbed as evidence of the other's corruption and the in-group's righteousness. The Synaxis becomes a tool of capture rather than liberation.

Addiction rewards the suppression of Synactic attention. The neurochemical rewards of righteous anger, tribal belonging, and moral superiority are strongest when the Synaxis is directed outward at the other. Turning the Synaxis inward would produce shame, doubt, isolation, the very experiences the addiction mechanism is designed to avoid.

The result is a culture that has lost the capacity to perceive its own deepest grammar. The Synaxis, starved of use, atrophies. And with its atrophy, the possibility of liberation recedes.

6.5 The Two Directions of Synactic Attention

The Synaxis operates in two directions, though they are ultimately inseparable.

Inward, the Synaxis perceives the gap between the code one is running and the values one genuinely holds. This is the threshold moment described in Section 7: the moment when dissonance becomes perceptible, when a choice remains available, when capture can be resisted. The inward direction is not introspection in the ordinary sense. It is not navel-gazing or self-analysis. It is the perception of the relationship between the self and the code that structures the self, the recognition that one is inhabiting a grammar that may not be one's own.

Outwardly, the Synaxis perceives the VMP grammar operating in the cultural field in political discourse, in institutional communications, in collective behaviour, and in the narratives that circulate through a society. This outward direction is primary. One must first perceive the code in the world before one can perceive it in oneself. The Synaxis is not a faculty of self-absorption but of world-attentiveness. It sees the grammar of the other, and in seeing it, learns to see its own grammar as well.

These two directions are not separate capacities, but the same capacity turned inward and outward. The Synaxis that perceives the extrinsic grammar of the political opponent is the same Synaxis that perceives the extrinsic grammar of one's own tribe, if it has been exercised sufficiently to recognise

itself. The tragedy of capture asymmetry, described in Section 5, is precisely that the Synaxis has been trained to look outward but not inward. The captured subject sees the code in the other with perfect clarity while remaining blind to the same code in themselves. This is not a failure of the Synaxis but its deformation: a capacity turned against itself, serving the metanarrative it might have exposed.

6.6 The Synaxis as Collective Capacity

The Synaxis is prone to capture, which is why creating spaces of collective attention can help to see what we fail to see through a captured synaxis.

A Synactic Council is a structured space in which a group practises shared attention to the VMP grammar operating in their shared context. Participants do not debate, decide, or produce outcomes. They attend. They hold the dissonance between the code they are running and the values they genuinely care about. They allow that dissonance to become visible without immediately resolving it.

The Synactic Council differs from other collective practices in several respects:

Not a therapy group: the focus is not on individual healing but on collective perception. Participants do not share their personal histories or emotional wounds unless those histories illuminate the shared VMP grammar. They share what they see.

Not a town hall: the goal is not decision-making but discernment. The council does not produce policy, strategy, or action plans. It produces clarity about the code that is running.

Not a debate: the structure is not adversarial but receptive. Participants do not argue for their position; they attend to what the situation discloses and help each other to see more clearly.

Not a consensus process: the goal is not agreement but shared perception. Participants may see differently; the council holds these differences without demanding resolution.

The Synactic Council is, in this sense, the collective practice of the Synaxis. It is the discipline through which groups recover the capacity to see the grammar they are running, to feel the dissonance between that grammar and the values they genuinely hold, and to choose, collectively, a different orientation.

6.7 Cultivating the Synaxis: Practices

The Synaxis is a capacity that can be cultivated. The practices are not techniques to be mastered but disciplines of receptivity, ways of attending that create the conditions in which Synactic perception can arise.

Valueception is the practice of perceiving intrinsic value directly, before it is filtered through the categories of the metanarrative. It is the cultivation of attention that can feel the pull of the true, the good, and the beautiful independently of the grammar that seeks to appropriate them. Valueception is not a technique for generating correct beliefs; it is a discipline for restoring the perceptual capacity that capture disables.

Kenotic disciplines such as silence, stillness, welcoming, the patient work of self-emptying are the practices through which the self becomes capable of release. They are not techniques for achieving special experiences; they are the slow, difficult work of loosening the identification between self and metanarrative, of creating space in which the possibility of a different orientation can emerge.

Threshold moment attention is the practice of pausing at moments of dissonance, of refusing to resolve the tension prematurely, of allowing the code to become visible before acting. It is the discipline of the Synaxis in everyday life: the willingness to hold the discomfort of not-knowing, to trust that what is true will disclose itself when the pressure to act is suspended.

Synactic Council participation is the collective discipline through which the Synaxis is practised in community. It is the recognition that one cannot see alone, that the grammar one inhabits is most visible to others who inhabit it with one, that shared attention can perceive what individual attention cannot.

VMP diagnosis is the application of Synactic perception to specific texts, campaigns, communications, and institutions. It is the Synaxis in its analytic mode: the practice of reading any communication through the VMP triad, identifying what values are being warmed, what motivation is being called on, and what purpose is being served.

These practices are not sequential stages but mutually reinforcing disciplines. Valueception trains the Synaxis to perceive value directly. Kenotic disciplines create the internal space in which Synactic attention can arise. Threshold moment attention brings the Synaxis into everyday life. Synactic Council participation provides the collective context in which individual perception can be tested and refined. VMP diagnosis applies the Synaxis to the cultural field, turning perception into the first act of resistance.

6.8 The Synaxis and Liberation

The recovery of the Synaxis is not a spiritual luxury. It is the precondition of any genuine response to the metacrisis.

Without the Synaxis, the captured subject cannot see the code they are running. They experience their own values as simply “the way things are,” their motivations as natural, their purposes as given. The gap between the code and their deeper values remains invisible. The threshold moments identified in Section 7 come and go without being perceived. Capture becomes permanent, not through coercion but through the atrophy of the capacity that would expose it.

Without the Synaxis, collective discernment collapses. A group cannot perceive the grammar it is running; it can only argue about the content. Debates continue, strategies are refined, institutions are reformed, but the underlying VMP code remains unchanged. The group becomes more efficient at running the same code, not more capable of running a different one. This is why, as noted in Section 3, changing the explicit narrative while leaving the implicit VMP grammar unchanged produces no genuine transformation.

Without the Synaxis, resistance is reduced to reacting against symptoms. One fights the policies of extrinsic capture without perceiving the grammar that generates them. One opposes the metanarrative without seeing the code that animates it. Resistance becomes a mirror of what it opposes, extrinsically motivated, fear-driven, oriented toward defeating the enemy rather than aligning with the good.

The Synaxis is the faculty that breaks this paralysis. It is what makes it possible to see the code. It is what makes it possible to feel the dissonance between the grammar one is running and the values

one genuinely holds. It is what makes it possible to choose, at the threshold moments where choice remains possible, a different orientation.

The exile of evil from serious discourse, diagnosed in Section 1, is, in this framework, a symptom of the atrophy of the Synaxis. A culture that cannot perceive VMP grammars cannot name evil. A culture that cannot name evil cannot resist it. A culture that cannot resist it is, by that very incapacity, already captured, not necessarily by the extreme forms of evil that produced the Holocaust and the gulag, but by the milder, more pervasive, more respectable forms of capture that make those extremes possible when the conditions are right.

The recovery of the Synaxis is therefore not a private spiritual project. It is the work of liberation itself. It is the discipline of seeing the code, of trusting one's own perception when everything around one tells one not to, of holding the tension with others who share the same disquiet, of refusing the grammar of capture and choosing, together, to run a different one.

This is not easy. It is not quick. It requires the cultivation of capacities that have been systematically atrophied. It requires the willingness to suffer, not suffering as trauma or violence, but suffering as the cost of genuine transformation, the *kenosis* that empties the self of the false identities the code has supplied. It requires the support of communities dedicated to collective discernment. It requires, above all, the courage to trust that what is true, good, and beautiful will disclose itself to those who attend.

But it is possible. The history of resistance to evil is the history of those who, at threshold moments, refused the logic that surrounded them. Not because they possessed a special insight, but because they were willing to surrender the identities the extrinsic captured metanarrative afforded them. They saw reality as it was. They did not need a framework to name what they saw; they needed the courage to trust their own perception when everything around them told them not to.

The VMP framework does not replace this courage. It gives it language. And in giving it language, it helps it survive in a culture that has trained itself not to listen.

Section 7: The Suffering-Avoidance Engine: Why Capture Is Chosen

The account developed so far raises a question that is at once phenomenological and existential: if evil metanarratives produce systematic harm, if they operate through mechanisms that undermine genuine human flourishing, and if they ultimately lead to the destruction of the communities that embrace them, why do people choose capture? Why does the grip of an evil metanarrative feel, from the inside, not like constraint but like liberation?

The answer, this paper argues, lies in a fundamental feature of human motivational architecture that the VMP framework makes visible. Genuine alignment with intrinsic value, the direction of consciousness toward the true, the good, and the beautiful, requires a specific relationship with suffering. It requires what the contemplative traditions call *kenosis*: the willingness to relinquish the security of one's current self-configuration in order to become more genuinely aligned with telic value. It requires tolerating the discomfort of not-knowing, the vulnerability of genuine openness, the dissolution of the fixed identity that the extrinsic code provides.

The evil metanarrative offers exactly the opposite. It offers complete protection from this suffering. And it is this promise, the promise of meaning without cost, of purpose without vulnerability, of identity without uncertainty that constitutes its seductive power.

The Price of Intrinsic Alignment

To be oriented by intrinsic value is to be oriented by something that exceeds one's current understanding, one's current identity, one's current configuration of the self. The pull of the true, the good, and the beautiful does not respect the boundaries we have constructed around ourselves. To respond to that pull is to be perpetually unsettled, to be drawn beyond the comfortable, the familiar, the already-known.

This unsettling is not a failure of intrinsic alignment; it is its condition of possibility. The capacity to be moved by value requires the capacity to be changed by it. It requires the humility to acknowledge that what one currently values may not be what one ought to value, that what one currently sees may be partial, that what one currently is may be a stage on a journey rather than a destination.

The wisdom traditions have named this capacity *kenosis*, a form of self-emptying, the willingness to let go of the current configuration of the self in order to be filled by what is greater. In Christian theology, it is the self-emptying of Christ, the willingness to relinquish the security of divine form to take on human vulnerability. In Buddhism, it is the letting go of the illusion of a fixed self, the dissolution of the ego that stands in the way of awakening. In the philosophical tradition, it is Socrates' insistence that the unexamined life is not worth living, that the willingness to question one's most fundamental commitments is not a threat to the good life but its foundation.

This capacity is not easily acquired. It is not a natural disposition but a cultivated one. It requires the discipline to tolerate uncertainty, to remain present with the discomfort of not-knowing, to resist the lure of premature closure. It requires, in short, the capacity to *suffer*, not suffering as trauma or violence, but suffering as the willingness to endure the cost of genuine openness to reality. This is the requirement of the Law of Asymmetry (O'Brien, forthcoming), the principle that intrinsic value can only be realised at genuine costs, that it requires effort, energy and often sacrifice. Genuine value cannot be had on the cheap.

The Promise of Capture

The evil metanarrative offers release from this suffering. Where intrinsic orientation demands openness, the extrinsic configuration offers certainty. Where intrinsic orientation demands humility, the evil metanarrative offers righteousness. Where intrinsic orientation demands the willingness to be changed, the extrinsic configuration offers a fixed identity, a clear purpose, a community that will never ask one to question one's place within it.

The psychological goods on offer are real. A clear identity resolves the modern crisis of selfhood. A clear enemy provides the satisfaction of knowing who to blame. A clear purpose replaces the diffuse anxiety of meaninglessness with the focused energy of a mission. Tribal belonging offers the warmth of solidarity, the certainty of being on the right side, the security of knowing that one is not alone. Moral certainty replaces the exhausting work of ethical reflection with the ease of unshakeable conviction.

These goods are not trivial. The human hunger for them is not a pathology. It is a reflection of our fundamental need for meaning, for connection, for orientation. The evil metanarrative does not invent these needs; it exploits them. It promises to satisfy them without requiring the cost that genuine orientation toward intrinsic value demands.

This is why the experience of capture feels, from the inside, like liberation. The sufferer of existential uncertainty finds relief. The seeker of meaning finds purpose. The isolated individual finds community. The uncertain conscience finds certainty. The price, the suspension of humility, the foreclosure of self-reflection, the closing of the self to the Other is paid in a currency the captured subject has been taught not to value.

Why the Cure Feels Like the Disease

The deepest tragedy of capture is that it specifically incapacitates the capacities that would free the captured subject. It does not merely produce error; it produces a motivational architecture in which the pathways to truth are experienced as threats.

Humility, in the intrinsic orientation, is the recognition that one's current understanding is partial, that one may be wrong, that there is something greater to which one must remain open. In the extrinsic configuration, humility is experienced as weakness, as the failure to defend the purity of the community, as the betrayal of the cause, as the softness that allows the enemy to prevail. The captured subject does not lack humility; they have been trained to fear it. The syntactic tension of holding opposing values and perspectives without collapsing into either pole is beyond the captured subject.

Self-reflection, in the intrinsic orientation, is the capacity to examine one's own motivations, to hold oneself accountable, to subject one's own commitments to the same scrutiny one applies to others. In the extrinsic configuration, self-reflection is experienced as self-betrayal, as the voice of the enemy within, as the doubt that undermines the collective, as the insidious influence of the Other. The captured subject does not lack the capacity for self-reflection; they have been taught to experience it as a threat to their identity and their community.

Kenosis, the willingness to let go of one's current self-configuration is, in the intrinsic orientation, the condition of growth. In the extrinsic configuration, it is experienced as annihilation. The fixed identity the metanarrative provides is not merely a convenience; it is the ground of the captured subject's selfhood. To question it is not to risk a change of opinion; it is to risk the dissolution of the self. The terror this prospect evokes is not irrational; it is the natural response of a self that has been constructed to depend entirely on the metanarrative that contains it.

This is the engine of capture's self-perpetuation. The evil metanarrative does not merely suppress the capacities that would dissolve it; it configures the motivational architecture of its subjects to experience those capacities as threats. Humility feels like weakness. Self-reflection feels like betrayal. Kenosis feels like annihilation. The cure is made to feel like the disease.

The Seduction and Its Cost

This analysis illuminates the seductive power of evil metanarratives without excusing them. It explains why ordinary people, not monsters or psychopaths, or fundamentally different from their contemporaries, come to embrace metanarratives that produce systematic harm. It does not deny

their agency. It locates that agency in the choice, often made incrementally, often under conditions of genuine uncertainty and distress, to accept the promise of meaning without cost, certainty without vulnerability, belonging without openness.

The promise, of course, is illusory. The certainty the evil metanarrative provides is purchased at the price of the capacity to recognise one's own errors. The belonging it offers is conditional on participation in the dehumanisation of the Other. The purpose it supplies is oriented toward the destruction of what is good. The suffering it avoids is merely deferred and multiplied beyond measure.

The captured subject is not innocent. But they are also not the monster of the theological imagination. They are, more disturbingly, ordinary. And it is precisely their ordinariness that demands we understand the mechanism of their capture, rather than settling for the comforting fiction of their pathology.

Section 8: Moral Responsibility Under Capture

The account of evil as extrinsic metanarrative capture raises an urgent ethical question. If people are captured by metanarratives they did not choose and cannot, from within the frame of capture, perceive as such, in what sense can they be held morally responsible for what they do under capture? Does the framework diminish or even abolish the very concept of responsibility it needs to preserve the distinction between victim and perpetrator, between resistance and complicity?

The objection is serious, and it must be met with equal seriousness. The capture account, this paper argues, does not eliminate responsibility. It reconfigures it in a philosophically more precise and ethically more demanding way.

Threshold Moments

Capture is not a binary state. It is a process, one that unfolds over time through incremental choices, through the gradual alignment of attention, motivation, and purpose with the grammar of the metanarrative. Before capture becomes complete, there are always threshold moments. Moments when the emerging code's dissonance with the person's deeper values is perceptible. Moments when the Synaxis, the faculty of meta-aware attention that perceives the gap between the code one is running and the value one truly cares about, can still function. Moments when a different direction remains available.

These threshold moments are the locus of moral responsibility under the capture account. At such moments, the agent is not yet fully captured. They can perceive, however dimly, that something is wrong. They can feel the tension between the emerging metanarrative and their own deeper commitments. They can choose, and the choice is real, to resist, to withdraw, to refuse the further alignment that capture requires.

The transition from resistance to capture is not a single event but a process of incremental habituation. Each choice to participate in the metanarrative's logic lowers the threshold for the next choice. Each act of compliance makes the next act easier, less dissonant and less requiring of explicit justification. The phenomenon is well documented. Christopher Browning's account of Reserve Police Battalion 101 describes this dynamic precisely: the men were given the option to withdraw from the killing operations. Most did not. They were not coerced. They were offered a choice, and they chose to

participate and with each participation, the threshold for the next act of participation lowered, the dissonance diminished, the capture deepened (Browning, 1992).

The process is one of graduated moral anaesthesia: the progressive dulling of the capacity to perceive the moral weight of one's actions. It is not that the agent ceases to be reasons-responsive at a single moment; rather, the range of reasons to which they are responsive narrows incrementally. Actions that would have been unthinkable at the outset become thinkable, then acceptable, then routine, then required. The agent does not lose agency all at once; they lose it piecemeal, through a series of choices, each of which, taken in isolation, might have been resistible.

Moral responsibility is not abolished by the fact that most eventually became habituated to atrocity. It is concentrated in the threshold moments when the choice to resist was still available and was refused. And it is further specified by the recognition that each refusal of resistance deepens the habituation, making the next threshold harder to perceive and the next refusal harder to enact. The process does not eliminate responsibility; it distributes it across a chain of choices, each of which carries the weight of the subsequent habituation it enables.

The Transition Point: When Reasons-Responsiveness Fails

The transition from threshold to post-threshold capture, from the state in which dissonance remains perceptible to the state in which the code has become invisible, cannot be specified as a single moment. Capture is a process, not an event. But certain phenomenological markers indicate when the transition has substantially occurred. The capacity for spontaneous self-questioning has ceased; alternative perspectives are no longer merely unattractive but literally incomprehensible; empathy with the out-group has been replaced by its systematic inversion; and the mechanisms of immunisation and moral inversion operate automatically rather than requiring effortful suppression of doubt.

These markers matter enormously for the ethical and legal implications of the capture account. They identify the point at which Fischer and Ravizza's reasons-responsiveness (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998), the capacity to recognise and respond to moral considerations, has been severely compromised. At this point, the captured subject is genuinely, not performatively, unable to perceive the moral status of their actions from outside the grammar they inhabit. The Nuremberg defence of "I was only following orders" is not typically a lie in the straightforward sense; it reflects a genuine incapacity for moral perception in subjects who have passed the threshold of complete capture.

Yet two qualifications are essential. First, the post-threshold state is not a permanent abolition of reasons-responsiveness but its severe suppression. The history of defection and resistance, the soldiers who refused orders, the citizens who sheltered the persecuted, demonstrates that encounters with the concrete reality of the Other can break through even advanced capture. Primo Levi's account of the "grey zone" in the camps reveals that even under conditions of extreme capture, genuine choices remained possible, however costly. The post-threshold state closes off the ordinary pathways of moral perception; it does not permanently seal every possible aperture.

Second, and crucially, the suppression of reasons-responsiveness in individual perpetrators does not dissolve moral and legal responsibility. It redirects it. When individual agency is severely constrained by advanced capture, responsibility for the conditions of that constraint falls with increased weight on those who designed, transmitted, and perpetuated the metanarrative. The architects of the ideology,

the propagandists who spread it, the institutional leaders who normalised it, the bystanders with sufficient distance to perceive it who chose not to intervene. The Nuremberg Tribunals' development of command responsibility and conspiracy liability reflects a partial legal recognition of precisely this redistribution, though without the theoretical framework to explain why it is not merely legally convenient but morally required.

The capture account does not, therefore, provide a general diminished-responsibility defence for perpetrators of ideologically motivated atrocity. It provides a more precise map of where responsibility is concentrated, how it is distributed across individuals and structures, and why the conventional focus on individual perpetrators, while legally necessary, is morally insufficient. The most important moral responsibility, on the capture account, falls not on those who commit atrocity under complete capture, but on those who could have disrupted the metanarrative's development at the structural level and chose not to.

Structural Responsibility

Once capture is sufficiently advanced, the scope for individual moral agency within the existing framework narrows dramatically. The captured subject can no longer perceive the code they are running. The mechanisms described in the previous section, invisibility, immunisation, moral inversion, capture of critique and addiction have closed off the pathways that would allow genuine moral reflection. At this point, the captured subject is, in a real sense, no longer acting from their own values. They are acting from the values the metanarrative has configured for them.

This does not abolish responsibility. It shifts its locus. When individual agency is severely constrained, responsibility for the conditions that produced and maintain that constraint falls on the structural and cultural level. Who created the metanarrative? Who perpetuates it? Who profits from its perpetuation? Who could intervene to disrupt its mechanisms and chooses not to?

This redistribution of responsibility is not merely a philosophical proposal; it has already found expression in international criminal law. The Nuremberg trials established the principle of command responsibility: a leader is liable not only for orders they directly issued but also for crimes committed by subordinates under their effective authority when they knew or should have known that such crimes were being committed and failed to prevent or punish them (International Military Tribunal, 1946). The International Criminal Court's doctrine of "effective control" extends this logic further (Rome Statute, 1998, Art. 28). Responsibility attaches not only to what a leader ordered but to what they knowingly failed to prevent. The commander who turns a blind eye to atrocity is no less responsible than the one who gives the order; they are differently responsible, and the law now recognises that difference.

The capture account's redistribution of responsibility operates at the same structural level. The architects of evil metanarratives, the propagandists who spread them, the institutions that normalise them, the leaders who knowingly permit their operation, these actors bear a different order of responsibility than the captured subject who acts from within the grammar they did not create and could no longer see. The legal doctrine of command responsibility demonstrates that this redistribution is not a speculative philosophical claim but a principle already operative in the most developed systems of accountability for mass atrocity. What the capture account adds is a mechanism: the VMP framework diagnoses how the grammar of capture is produced, transmitted,

and maintained, and thereby specifies who, at the structural level, bears responsibility for its perpetuation.

Second-Order Responsibility

The capture account does not, however, leave even the captured subject without ethical demand. It introduces a form of responsibility that the traditional frameworks lack: the responsibility to develop the perceptual faculty, the Synaxis, that makes it possible to see the code before capture becomes complete.

This is what might be called *second-order moral responsibility*. It is not responsibility for particular actions within the existing metanarrative. It is the responsibility to cultivate the capacity that allows one to perceive the metanarrative as such, to recognise the grammar of value, motivation, and purpose one is running, to feel the dissonance between that grammar and one's deeper values, to choose alignment with intrinsic orientation before the threshold closes.

This responsibility is not theoretical. It is practical, embodied, and ongoing. It is the responsibility to practice the kind of attention that perceives value directly, to engage in collective discernment with others, to cultivate the humility that keeps one open to correction. It is the responsibility to develop the capacities of the Synaxis, valueception, and the willingness to enter into syntactic tension where one holds the tension of opposites that make capture less likely and resistance more possible.

Responsibility Reconfigured

The capture account does not eliminate responsibility. It reconfigures it along three axes.

First, it concentrates responsibility at threshold moments, those points before capture becomes complete where choice remains available and dissonance remains perceptible. At these moments, the agent bears full responsibility for the direction they choose.

Second, it shifts responsibility for structural capture to the collective level, to the communities, institutions, and cultural actors who create and sustain the metanarratives that capture individuals. This is not a dilution of responsibility but a more precise identification of its locus.

Third, it introduces second-order responsibility: the responsibility to cultivate the perceptual capacities that make capture visible and resistance possible. This is responsibility not for what one does under capture but for whether one becomes capturable at all.

This account is philosophically grounded in the work of Harry Frankfurt, who distinguished between first-order desires and second-order volitions, the capacity to reflect on one's own motivations and to will to have certain motivations rather than others (Frankfurt, 1971). The second-order responsibility proposed here is the responsibility to develop the capacity for such reflection, the capacity to examine the very grammar of one's own motivation, to ask whether the code one is running is the code one chooses to run.

It also draws on John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's account of moral responsibility as requiring not just causal determinism but a "reasons-responsiveness" that allows the agent to recognise and respond to moral considerations (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). The captured subject, in the grip of an evil metanarrative, has lost this reasons-responsiveness, but this loss is not a brute fact. It is the cumulative product of choices made at threshold moments, of a failure to cultivate the perceptual

capacities that would have made capture visible, of a collective failure to disrupt the mechanisms that produced and maintained the metanarrative.

Responsibility Without Illusion

The capture account thus offers an account of moral responsibility that is both demanding and realistic. It does not pretend that agents are always fully transparent to themselves, that they always choose their metanarratives, or that they are never captured by forces beyond their perception. It acknowledges the reality of capture, and it holds agents responsible for the moments when capture could have been resisted, for the conditions that made capture possible, and for the cultivation of the capacities that make capture less likely.

This is not a weaker account of responsibility than the traditional frameworks provide. It is a stronger one because it asks not only about what one does, but about what one has become, and about what one is doing to become someone who can see. It holds us responsible not only for our actions but for the perceptual and motivational architecture from which our actions arise. And it insists that the first step toward resisting evil is the cultivation of the capacity to see it, before it becomes invisible, before the threshold closes, before the code runs us rather than we running it.

Section 9: Structural Evil and the Political Dimension

The account of evil as extrinsic metanarrative capture has, thus far, focused on the dynamics of the code itself: how VMP configurations structure perception, motivation, and purpose; how self-protective mechanisms perpetuate capture; how the suffering-avoidance engine makes capture seductive. The analysis of capture must be integrated with an analysis of the structural conditions that determine which VMP configurations are genuinely available to whom. It can appear to treat metanarratives as if they floated freely, available to all, the difference between capture and liberation merely a matter of perceptual and motivational recalibration. But VMP configurations are not equally available to all. They are embedded in structures of power, historically produced, materially enforced, and differentially distributed across social positions.

Structural evil is the institutionalisation of extrinsic VMP codes that systematically deny certain groups access to the conditions of genuine moral and motivational flourishing. It operates not only through the capture of individuals but through the organisation of social, economic, and political life in ways that make some VMP configurations mandatory and others impossible. To understand evil fully, the analysis of capture must be integrated with an analysis of the structural conditions that determine which codes are genuinely available to whom.

VMP Suppression and VMP Exclusion

The structural dimension of evil can be analysed through two complementary mechanisms.

VMP suppression is the cultural and institutional silencing of intrinsic motivational orientations through the design of everyday practices, policies, and communications. It is the systematic warming of extrinsic values, including anxiety, status-seeking, and passivity, and the systematic cooling of intrinsic values of care, solidarity, and openness to the Other. VMP suppression operates through education systems that reward competition rather than curiosity, through economies that measure value in price rather than worth, through media that capture attention rather than cultivate attention. It is the grammar of the marketing paradigm made material.

VMP exclusion is more fundamental. It is the structural denial of the material conditions within which intrinsic orientations become genuinely available. A person experiencing chronic hunger, precarious housing, systematic violence, or the daily degradation of colonial occupation does not lack the *capacity* for intrinsic orientation. But the conditions of their life may foreclose the possibility of sustaining such orientation. Intrinsic values such as care, solidarity and openness require a baseline of security, a margin of freedom from immediate threat, a space in which attention can turn from survival to flourishing. Where these conditions are systematically denied, intrinsic orientation becomes not a choice but a luxury, and extrinsic capture becomes not a seduction but a necessity.

Both suppression and exclusion are forms of structural evil. They are not merely the absence of good; they are the active organisation of social life in ways that produce, perpetuate, and normalise extrinsic capture for entire populations.

The Colonial Archive

The traditions of post-colonial thought provide the historical and political grounding that the motivational account alone cannot reach. Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial domination in *The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 1963; Fanon, 1967) is, at its core, an account of VMP suppression and exclusion. Colonialism does not merely exploit the colonised; it systematically destroys their capacity for intrinsic orientation. It imposes a grammar in which the colonised can only experience themselves through the categories of the coloniser, as inferior, as primitive, as not yet fully human. The internalisation of this grammar is not a failure of the colonised to resist; it is the structural condition of their existence under colonial power. Fanon's insistence that decolonisation requires not merely political independence but a "new start" for the colonised consciousness, a metanoia, is precisely an account of liberation from the structural evil of colonial capture.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) extends this analysis to the organisation of death and survival as the primary register of political power. Necropolitics is the governance of populations through the differential allocation of the risk of death. It is not merely the suppression of intrinsic orientation but its outright foreclosure. Under necropolitics, certain populations are consigned to what Mbembe calls a "state of exception" in which the ordinary conditions of flourishing, including security, dignity, and the possibility of projecting a future, are systematically denied. Here, extrinsic capture is not a choice but the only available mode of survival. The grammar of value, motivation, and purpose is not merely distorted; it is reduced to the bare calculus of life and death.

Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the "state of exception" in *Homo Sacer and State of Exception* (Agamben, 1998; Agamben, 2005) provides the European legal-philosophical counterpart to Mbembe's post-colonial account. Agamben argues that sovereign power operates through the capacity to suspend law, to create a "zone of indistinction" in which legal protections are withdrawn and certain lives are reduced to "bare life," exposed to violence without legal recourse. The concentration camp, for Agamben, is the paradigm of this logic: a space in which law is neither fully present nor fully absent, and in which the inmate exists in a condition of juridical indeterminacy, deprived of the status that would entitle them to protection (Agamben, 1998; 2005).

Agamben and Mbembe are complementary. Where Mbembe shows how colonial power organises populations for death, Agamben shows how sovereign power suspends law to create spaces in which

such organisation becomes possible. Where Mbembe's necropolitics analyses the racialised distribution of death, Agamben's state of exception analyses the juridical structure that makes such distribution legally operable. Together, they provide a double account of structural evil: one from the perspective of the colonised, one from the perspective of the legal-political order that enables colonisation. Both demonstrate that the extrinsic VMP code is not merely a matter of individual motivation but is inscribed in law, territory, and the spatial organisation of who lives and who dies.

Structural Sin and Liberation Theology

Liberation theology offers a complementary vocabulary. Its concept of structural sin names the reality that evil is not reducible to individual acts but is embedded in social arrangements, institutions, and systems. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino (Gutiérrez, 1973; Sobrino, 1994), and other liberation theologians argue that poverty, oppression, and the systematic exclusion of the poor from the conditions of flourishing are not merely social problems but forms of sin because they violate the fundamental dignity of human beings, because they block the possibility of authentic relationship with God and neighbour, because they require the active cooperation of those who benefit from them. Structural sin is the institutionalisation of a grammar that treats some lives as valuable and others as expendable.

Gutiérrez's concept of the preferential option for the poor is directly relevant to the VMP framework's account of structural exclusion. The preferential option is not a claim that the poor are morally superior; it is a recognition that the conditions of material deprivation systematically deny certain populations the freedom to pursue intrinsic goods. The poor are not less capable of intrinsic orientation, but the structures of poverty foreclose the conditions of security, dignity and the margin of freedom from immediate threat, under which such orientation can flourish. The preferential option is an institutional and political commitment to redress this structural exclusion, to create the conditions under which intrinsic orientation becomes genuinely possible for those to whom it has been denied (Gutiérrez, 1973).

Jon Sobrino develops this further in his analysis of the "crucified peoples" (Sobrino, 1999), populations that, like Jesus on the cross, are executed by the dominant order not despite their innocence but because their existence challenges the grammar of power. Sobrino argues that the crucified peoples are not merely victims; they are revelatory. In their suffering, the structural sin that the powerful seek to render invisible becomes visible. The resurrection, for Sobrino, is not a reward for the innocent but the vindication of those whom the world has condemned, the demonstration that the grammar of domination does not have the final word (Sobrino, 1994).

The VMP framework provides the mechanism that liberation theology's structural analysis requires. Gutiérrez's preferential option is an argument about differential access to the conditions of intrinsic orientation. Sobrino's crucified peoples are those whose lives are governed by an extrinsic VMP code that treats them as expendable, whose value is systematically denied, whose motivation is reduced to survival, whose purpose is constrained to endurance. The resurrection, in the terms of this framework, is the affirmation that the intrinsic grammar cannot be finally suppressed, that the telic orientation toward flourishing is more fundamental than the extrinsic codes that temporarily capture it. Liberation, then, is the work of creating the conditions, material, political and cultural, in which intrinsic orientation becomes genuinely possible for those to whom it has been denied, and in which the crucified peoples can rise.

The Integration

The analysis of structural evil does not replace the account of motivational capture. It completes it. The VMP framework shows how evil operates at the level of the grammar of consciousness. The post-colonial and liberation traditions show how that grammar is embedded in material structures of power, how it is enforced through institutions, and how it is differentially distributed across populations. Together, they provide a more adequate account of evil than either alone.

This integration has practical consequences. The work of liberation from evil metanarratives cannot be only the work of individual recalibration. It must also be the work of transforming the structures that systematically produce and maintain VMP suppression and exclusion. This is not to deny the necessity of the Synaxis, of valueception, of collective discernment. It is to insist that these practices, if they are to be genuine, must be embedded in a politics of structural transformation, a politics that takes as its orienting purpose the creation of conditions in which intrinsic orientation becomes genuinely available to all.

The account of structural evil also clarifies the distribution of moral responsibility. Those who design and maintain the structures of VMP suppression and exclusion bear a different order of responsibility than those who are captured by them. The colonial administrator, the architect of neoliberal economic policy, the media executive who chooses to amplify the extrinsic grammar of outrage, these actors may not be captured in the same sense as the foot soldier of atrocity. But they are, in a deeper sense, the structural authors of the conditions that make capture possible. Their responsibility is not diminished by the capture account; it is specified by it.

Section 10: Beyond Capture: Liberation, Metanoia, and the Practice of Recalibration

The diagnosis of evil as extrinsic metanarrative capture would be incomplete and, in its own way, disempowering if it did not address the possibility of liberation. If evil operates through the capture of the deep code of value, motivation, and purpose, then resistance to evil must operate at the same level. It must be not merely a matter of better arguments or more accurate information but a transformation of the very grammar through which experience is organized. This section argues that such transformation is possible, not through a magic solution, but through a disciplined practice of attention, discernment, and collective recalibration.

Liberation as Perceptual Recovery

The most common model of liberation from ideological capture is cognitive. If people believe false things because they have been misinformed, the solution is to provide them with correct information. If they have been persuaded by bad arguments, the solution is to supply better arguments. If they have been misled by propaganda, the solution is to expose the propaganda.

This model is not wrong, but it is insufficient. It treats the captured subject as fundamentally competent to assess evidence and arguments, a competence that capture, by its nature, erodes. The captured subject does not merely believe false propositions; they inhabit a perceptual and motivational framework in which certain propositions cannot be experienced as true, and certain values cannot be experienced as good. The problem is not in the content of their beliefs but in the grammar through which belief itself is structured.

Liberation, therefore, must begin at a deeper level. It is the recovery of the capacity to perceive the code while it is running, to see the VMP configuration for what it is, to feel the dissonance between the extrinsic grammar one is inhabiting and the intrinsic values one genuinely cares about, to choose, at the threshold moments where choice remains possible, a different orientation.

This is what the theological tradition calls *metanoia*, a turning, a reorientation, a change of heart and mind that precedes and produces changes in belief and behaviour rather than resulting from them. Metanoia is not primarily an intellectual event. It is a perceptual and motivational event: the restoration of the capacity to see, to feel, to be moved by what is real. It is the recovery of the Synaxis, the meta-aware faculty of consciousness that can perceive both the explicit narrative and the implicit VMP grammar structuring it. It is, in the language of this article, the moment when the water becomes visible to the fish.

The Paradigm as Self

To speak of metanoia is to acknowledge what makes genuine transformation so difficult and so rare. The metanarrative one inhabits is not merely a set of beliefs; it is the organising structure of one's identity. To question the metanarrative is to question the self. To loosen its grip is to risk the dissolution of the self as one has known it.

This is the *Paradigm as Self* problem. A captured subject does not experience the metanarrative as external constraint. They experience it as their own deepest convictions, their own most authentic values, their own free choices. The grammar they run is not a code they could step outside of; it is the very medium in which their sense of self is constituted. To be asked to question the metanarrative is to be asked to question who one is.

This is why metanarrative shift is experienced not as an intellectual update but as something closer to psychic death, the dissolution of an identity organised around the existing code. The terror this evokes is not irrational. It is the natural response of a self that has been constructed to depend entirely on the metanarrative that contains it. And it is why genuine transformation is so rarely produced by argument alone. Arguments can be deflected, immunised, absorbed into the very metanarrative they are intended to undermine. What is required is not a better argument but a different mode of encounter, one that can reach the perceptual and motivational level at which the code is actually running.

The Practices of Recalibration

This is why the practices associated with Synactic attention are not optional supplements to the intellectual framework but its necessary practical completion. They are the disciplines through which synactic tension can be practised, and metanoia becomes possible.

Valueception is the practice of perceiving intrinsic value directly, before it is filtered through the categories of the metanarrative. It is the cultivation of attention that can feel the pull of the true, the good, and the beautiful independently of the grammar that seeks to appropriate them. It is not a technique for generating correct beliefs; it is a discipline for restoring the perceptual capacity that capture disables.

The *Synactic Council* is the practice of collective discernment, a structured space in which a group of people practice holding their shared metanarratives in productive tension, allowing the dissonance

between the code they are running and the values they truly care about to become visible. It is not a debate. It is not a negotiation. It is a shared exercise in attention, in which participants help each other see what they cannot see alone.

The *kenotic disciplines* of the contemplative traditions, including silence, stillness and the patient work of self-emptying, are the practices through which the self becomes capable of release. They are not techniques for achieving special experiences; they are the slow, difficult work of loosening the identification between self and metanarrative, of creating space in which the possibility of a different orientation can emerge.

These disciplines are not confined to the contemplative life. They can be embedded in the ordinary structures of institutional life. Consider a corporate Synaxis: a company, rather than beginning a strategic planning session with debates about normative commitments or the weighing of competing stakeholder interests, begins with a collective practice of attention. The group sits together in silence, attending to the telic value that calls to them from the situation they inhabit, the value that the organisation is called to serve, the purpose that exceeds any quarterly target, the intrinsic good that makes their work worth doing. This is not an exercise in sentimentality. It is a discipline of perception. It reconfigures the motivational grammar of the organisation before any decision is made, aligning it with intrinsic purpose rather than allowing it to be captured by the extrinsic grammar of competition and extraction.

Such practices demonstrate that recalibration is not a retreat from the world into private interiority but a re-entry into the world with a different grammar. The corporate Synaxis, the Synactic Council, the daily practice of valueception, these are not optional supplements to institutional life. They are the forms of institutional life that a culture oriented toward intrinsic value requires. They are the practices through which capture is resisted, and through which, in the threshold moments where choice remains possible, a different direction is chosen.

They are, in short, the practice of *suffering well*, not suffering as trauma or violence, but suffering as the cost of genuine transformation.

The Exile of Evil as Symptom

We can now return, with the full resources of the foregoing analysis, to the question with which this article opened: why has the concept of evil been exiled from serious academic discourse? The answer which the Master Storytelling framework suggests is not primarily intellectual, nor a failure of philosophical nerve or conceptual resources. It is structural.

The dominant extrinsic metanarrative of contemporary intellectual culture in which value is subjective, motivation is self-referential, and purpose is the efficient pursuit of measurable outcomes, cannot accommodate the concept of evil as a structural feature of certain motivational configurations. To do so would require examining the motivational architecture of the culture of inquiry itself. It would require asking what values are being warmed by the prevailing grammar of academic discourse, what motivations are being called on, and what purposes are being served.

The exile of evil is itself evidence of the problem it is supposed to name. A culture that cannot speak of evil cannot see it. A culture that cannot see it cannot resist it. A culture that cannot resist it is, by that very incapacity, already captured. Not by the extreme forms of evil that produced the Holocaust

and the gulag, but by the milder, more pervasive, more respectable forms of capture that make those extremes possible when the conditions are right.

To recover the concept of evil is therefore not merely an intellectual project. It is a practical one. It is the work of seeing the code, the grammar of value, motivation, and purpose that runs not only through the metanarratives of totalitarian regimes but through the everyday discourse of liberal societies, through the institutions of inquiry that pride themselves on their value-neutrality, through the intellectual culture that has made evil unthinkable precisely when it is most present.

The Work of Liberation

The account of evil developed in this article is not a counsel of despair. It is, on the contrary, a map of the terrain of liberation in which a more accurate point of intervention emerges. If evil operates through the capture of metanarratives by an extrinsic VMP configuration, then liberation is the work of recalibration: the restoration of intrinsic value, motivation, and purpose as the orienting grammar of culture.

This work is not easy. It is not quick. It requires the cultivation of perceptual capacities that have been systematically atrophied. It requires the discipline to hold tension, to tolerate not-knowing, to risk the dissolution of the self. It requires the support of communities dedicated to collective discernment. It requires, above all, the willingness to suffer well, to accept the cost of genuine transformation as the price of genuine freedom.

But it is possible. The history of resistance to evil is the history of those who, at threshold moments, refused the logic that surrounded them, not because they possessed a special code, but because they were willing to surrender the identities the code offered them and to see reality as it was. They did not need a framework to name what they saw; they needed the courage to trust their own perception when everything around them told them not to.

The history of liberation is the history of those who cultivated the capacities of attention, humility, and openness that make capture less likely and resistance more possible, capacities that are not the property of an elite but are accessible to anyone willing to practice them. The recovery of the concept of evil is itself an act of resistance: a refusal to accept the grammar that would render evil invisible, a commitment to see what is there, to name it, and to resist it. The VMP framework does not replace this capacity; it gives it language, and in giving it language, helps it survive in a culture that has trained itself not to listen.

This is the work that remains. And it is the work to which the framework developed in this article, the VMP triad, the analysis of extrinsic capture, the practices of recalibration are offered as a contribution. Not a magic solution. Not a final answer. But a set of tools for the patient, collective, costly work of valueception, to see the underlying code, and choosing, together, to run a different one.

Towards a Metanarrative Ethics

This article has advanced three claims. First, evil is real, but its reality is not that of an independent ontological substance. It is the structural pattern of harm produced by specific extrinsic configurations of Value, Motivation, and Purpose. Configurations that operate beneath conscious awareness, that capture metanarratives, and that organise human energy toward cruelty, elimination,

and the systematic dehumanisation of the Other. Evil is not a force; it is the shape a culture takes when the telic orientation toward intrinsic value has been lost.

Second, the mechanism through which this pattern is produced and maintained is not mysterious. It is culturally transmissible, self-protective, and diagnosable. The five mechanisms of invisibility, immunisation, moral inversion, capture of critique, and addiction form an interlocking system that makes evil metanarratives remarkably resilient against internal doubt and external critique. They explain how ordinary people come to experience systematic cruelty as an expression of their deepest values, and why the capacities that would liberate them, such as humility, self-reflection and kenosis, are experienced as threats.

Third, liberation from this pattern requires not primarily better arguments or more accurate information, but the recovery of a perceptual faculty: the capacity to see the VMP code while it is running, to feel the dissonance between the grammar one inhabits and the intrinsic values one genuinely cares about, to choose, at the threshold moments where choice remains possible, a different orientation. This is the work of the Synaxis, of metanoia, of the patient, collective disciplines of recalibration.

These claims open a research programme that extends beyond the scope of this article. If consciousness is always already operating within implicit value-motivation-purpose architectures, and if these architectures can be diagnosed, resisted, and recalibrated, then a new domain of ethics comes into view. What might be called a **metanarrative ethics** would systematically explore the moral responsibilities that follow from this recognition.

A metanarrative ethics would investigate the responsibilities of those who design and transmit the metanarratives that shape culture: the educators, the storytellers, the leaders, the architects of public discourse. It would examine the obligations of institutions to audit their own VMP configurations, to ensure that their daily operations warm intrinsic rather than extrinsic values. It would develop the practices through which individuals and communities can cultivate the Synaxis, can hold their own metanarratives in productive tension, can discern the difference between the code they are running and the values they truly hold.

Most fundamentally, a metanarrative ethics would insist that the cultivation of the perceptual faculty through which the grammar of consciousness can be seen is not a private spiritual luxury but a public ethical necessity. In a world saturated with extrinsic codes, with the grammar of the marketing paradigm, with the polarising metanarratives of identity politics, with the quiet, respectable capture of intellectual culture itself, the capacity to see the code is the precondition of any resistance worthy of the name.

Conclusion: To see, to resist, to practice

To recover the concept of evil is to perform the first act of resistance: to see.

The exile of evil from serious discourse was not an intellectual achievement. It was a symptom, a symptom of the very capture this article has diagnosed. To recover the concept of evil is to refuse the grammar that would make it invisible. It is to insist that the pattern of harm produced by extrinsic metanarratives can be named, analysed, and resisted.

But this recovery requires more than a new concept. It requires a new sensibility, one adequate to the fractures of the present moment.

Modernity, for all its gifts, split fact from value. It taught us to treat the world as value-neutral, to confine meaning to the private sphere, to treat purpose as a human projection onto a silent universe. Postmodernity, for all its necessary critiques, deepened the split. It taught us that all grand narratives are oppressive, that value is only a mask for power, that any claim to truth is a claim to domination.

What is emerging, and what this article participates in, is a metamodern sensibility. It is not a return to modern certainty. It is not a surrender to postmodern irony. It is a willingness to hold the tension between them, to refuse the easy resolution of either pole, and to ask the question that modernity and postmodernity together rendered unaskable: what is real, what is good, what is true?

A Plural Epistemology, Grounded in Value

A metamodern sensibility begins with a plural epistemology: the recognition that there are multiple, irreducible ways of knowing made up of (i) empirical, (ii) phenomenological, (iii) relational and (iv) normative (O'Brien, forthcoming). Wisdom lies not in choosing one but in holding them together. It rejects the imperialism of any single mode while insisting that they can, through disciplined attention, be integrated.

But integration requires ground. That ground, this article has argued, is value as an ontological primitive. Value is not a projection, not a preference, not a social construction. It is the felt reality of mattering, the resonance of the true, the good, and the beautiful, the telic grain of a universe that tends toward complexity, coherence, and flourishing.

To take value seriously is to heal the fact-value split that Hume's guillotine severed (Hume, 1978). It is to recognise that facts without value are not neutral; they are amputated, stripped of the significance that makes them worth knowing. And values without facts are not free; they are unmoored, detached from the reality that would test and refine them.

The Fruitfulness Criterion

If value is real, then claims about reality, including academic claims, cannot be evaluated only by their internal coherence or their correspondence to a value-neutral "is." They must also be evaluated by what they produce in the world. This is the fruitfulness criterion: a claim is true, in the fullest sense, if living as if it were true leads to human and ecological flourishing (O'Brien, forthcoming).

This criterion is not a policing mechanism. It is an enrichment. It asks of any discipline, any theory, any proposition: what values does this warm? What motivation does it call on? What purpose does it serve? Does it contribute to meaning, or does it drain meaning away? Does it help us see the real, or does it train us to ignore what is most real?

The natural sciences, when they stay within their domain, are immensely fruitful. But when they overreach, when they claim that the absence of value in their methods proves the absence of value in reality, they fail the fruitfulness criterion. They produce a world rich in facts and starved of meaning, and they contribute directly to the metacrisis they claim only to describe.

The same test applies to the framework developed in this article. The claim that evil operates through extrinsic metanarrative capture is not a dogma to be accepted on authority or due to its internal

coherence. It is a hypothesis to be tested. Does it illuminate historical cases? Does it help us diagnose the political polarisation of our own time? Does it suggest a path toward liberation? If it fails these tests, it must be refined or abandoned. If it passes them, it earns its place as a contribution to the urgent work of our time.

This formulation invites an obvious objection: do not many false beliefs produce flourishing in the short term? Comforting illusions, community myths, and even harmful ideologies can generate measurable well-being for specific populations over specific periods. The fruitfulness criterion proposed here is not a pragmatist theory of truth in the Jamesian or Rortyan sense. It does not assert that a claim is true because it produces flourishing, nor does it offer flourishing as a decision procedure for adjudicating between competing claims.

Rather, the criterion is axiological and phenomenological in orientation. It holds that truth, in the fullest sense, cannot be separated from value, that a claim that systematically leads to human and ecological degradation is, by that very fact, suspect as a complete account of reality. This position builds on the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy that Putnam (2002) and others have argued for, while insisting that the direction of dependence runs from value to flourishing, not from utility to truth.

The fruitfulness criterion thus functions not as a method of verification but as a diagnostic tool: when the Synaxis is aligned, it perceives the configurations of value, motivation, and purpose that produce genuine flourishing across time and for the whole. The work of specifying what counts as flourishing, over what timescale, and for whom, is not a limitation to be resolved before the criterion can be used but the very content of the discernment that the Synaxis makes possible. This paper has gestured toward such specification through its account of intrinsic VMP configuration and its analysis of historical cases, indigenous and traditional cultures that exhibited sustained pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours. A fuller development of the fruitfulness criterion, including its distinction from pragmatist accounts and its grounding in the phenomenology of value perception, must await future work.

What We Can Do Now

The metanarratives of extrinsic capture are not abstractions. They are the grammar of ideologies that dehumanise, polarise, and reduce the complexity of human life to the zero-sum logic of purity and threat. They feel overwhelming, self-perpetuating, immune to argument and resistant to evidence. It is easy to conclude that we are at their mercy.

The framework developed here suggests otherwise. The power of an extrinsic metanarrative is not the power of a thing; it is the power of a grammar we have forgotten how to see. And a grammar that can be seen can be refused.

The work of liberation begins not with the overthrow of institutions but with the recovery of attention, the willingness to pause, to feel the dissonance between the code we are being asked to run and the values we actually hold, to trust that perception even when everything around us tells us not to. This is not abstract. It is a practice.

It is a practice of attention that we be aware of any messages that demands that we reduce a complex situation to a battle between good and evil, a message that offers the safety of tribal belonging in exchange for the surrender of your capacity to see the other as fully human. At these threshold moments, we are invited to pause. To ask ourselves: what values is this warning? What motivation is

it calling on? What purpose is it serving? That pause is the Synaxis awakening. It is the threshold moment where capture can be resisted.

This work may be challenging, and it requires that we do not do this alone. The Synactic Council is not a technique reserved for experts; it is a practice any group can adopt. Gather with others who share your disquiet. Sit together in silence. Attend together to the value that calls us from the situation we inhabit. This is not to impose a pre-defined belief, nor to define what we ought to do, but to see what is actually true, good and beautiful in the moment. Through this shared attention we can find the ground on which to pivot our actions from.

The power of extrinsic capture is real, but it is not final. It feeds on our fear, our exhaustion, our conviction that there is no alternative. The moment we recover the capacity to see it, to feel the dissonance, to trust our own perception, to hold the tension with others, we are no longer at its mercy. We are not waiting for a new theory; we are already practicing a different grammar.

This is the work of a metamodern sensibility: holding the tension, integrating the modes, testing claims by their fruitfulness, and, in the threshold moments where choice remains possible, choosing the grammar of intrinsic value over the grammar of capture. It does not wait for institutions to change, for leaders to see what they cannot yet see, or for conditions to become favourable. It begins in the only place it can begin, in the willingness of any one person, in any one moment, to pause, to perceive what is genuinely real, and to trust that perception. The work requires everyone. It is available to anyone. And it is not a new project. It is the oldest human work: the recovery of what we most deeply are.

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Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study does not involve human participants, animals, or personal data.

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Author Contributions

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ⁱ The marketing paradigm, as used throughout this paper, refers not to a set of neutral communication techniques but to a dominant cultural grammar of extrinsic motivation, one that generates desire through the amplification of deficit and fear, offers "magic solutions" that promise transformation without cost, and instrumentalises all value into utility and measurable outcome. As the broader Master Storytelling framework argues (O'Brien, 2026), this paradigm has migrated from its origins in commercial advertising to become the default motivational logic of political communication, social change campaigns, and institutional management. Its relevance to the analysis of evil lies in its structural continuity with the extrinsic VMP orientation described in this paper: it warms extrinsic values (status, security, accumulation), recruits extrinsic motivation (fear, reward, social comparison), and orients purpose toward separable targets rather than intrinsic sources of value.