

Understanding Evil: American Slavery, the Holocaust, and the Conquest of the American Indians*

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In *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust*, Laurence Mordekhai Thomas seeks to increase our understanding of evil by discussing important differences between American slavery and the Holocaust. He notes that the Holocaust, particularly the murdering of the Jews in the camps, was shrouded in secrecy, whereas American slavery was a public institution such that people could easily find out how American slaves were treated (p. 7). He notes that while there were economic advantages and pressures to own slaves in the South, no one was required to do so, especially in the North.¹ By contrast, the Holocaust was mandated by law and all those under the Third Reich who were called upon were required to assist in its fulfillment (p. 7).

Thomas particularly wants to show that a comparison of American slavery with the Holocaust can and should be made without concluding that one of these evils was worse than the other. For example, while about six million Jews lost their lives in the Holocaust, Thomas notes that most likely more than that number of blacks lost their lives during the voyage from Africa to America (p. 9). (The usual estimates are

* A review of Laurence Mordekhai Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. xvii + 211. I was inspired to follow Thomas's own example while working on the essay and make my own pilgrimage to Auschwitz during the spring of 1995. I also benefited from conversations with Zbigniew Zwolinski and Jacek Holowka of the University of Warsaw, where I was presenting a series of lectures at the time. Finally, I owe a special thanks to Sharon O'Brien, my colleague here at Notre Dame, who importantly assisted me in my research on American Indians, to John Deigh for starting me on this project, and again to Thomas for reading the penultimate draft of the paper.

1. Only one-fourth of Southern white families actually owned slaves. Of this group, three-fourths owned fewer than ten slaves. See Melvin Leiman, *The Political Economy of Racism* (London: Pluto, 1993), p. 23.

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between forty million and sixty million.)² Nevertheless, Thomas argues that this difference does not show that American slavery was a worse evil than the Holocaust because the number of deaths is only one dimension of evil. Extinction is yet another, Thomas contends, arguing that the Holocaust threatened Jews with extinction in a way that American slavery never threatened blacks with extinction (pp. 9–11). That is why Nazi ideology toward Jewish children and Jewish adults was essentially the same: both were to be exterminated.³ By contrast, under American slavery, black children were often permitted to enjoy a measure of childhood and black and white children were often permitted to play together because black children were not yet ready to assume fully the role of slaves (pp. 7–8). However, Thomas argues that these differences do not show that the Holocaust was worse than American slavery any more than the greater loss of life under American slavery shows it to be worse than the Holocaust.

These are excellent points to make, and I think that Thomas's general strategy for comparing American slavery with the Holocaust in order to get a better understanding of evil is worthy of imitation. So in this essay I propose, in fact, to imitate it by extending his comparison to include the conquest of the American Indians by the Europeans who came to the New World. I hope to show that this three-way comparison of American slavery, the Holocaust, and the conquest of the American Indians helps us to better understand the nature of social evil and to better appreciate and evaluate Thomas's claims about how this social evil was possible.⁴

I

Recent estimates put the Indian population of North and South America before the arrival of Columbus at around one hundred million, with about fifteen million of these Indians living north of the Rio Grande. For comparison, the population of Europe was about seventy million, the population of Russia about eighteen million, and of Africa about seventy-two million.⁵ When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean islands, he was greeted by a people who called themselves the Arawak. Columbus describes them in a letter to the King and

2. David Stannard, *American Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 151.

3. The Nazis actually succeeded in killing two-thirds of the Jews of prewar Europe and the Soviet Union, and one-third of the Jews worldwide. See John Roth and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *The Holocaust* (New York: Paragon, 1989), p. xiv.

4. I will follow Thomas in using "American slavery" and "slavery" as equivalent expressions and in using "Holocaust" to refer to a unique historical event.

5. Stannard, pp. 261–68; Lenore Stiffarm with Phil Lane, Jr., "The Demography of Native North America," in *The State of Native America*, ed. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End, 1992), p. 23 ff.

Queen of Spain: "So tractable, so peaceful are these people that I swear to your Majesties there is not in the world a better nation. They love their neighbors as themselves, and their discourse is sweet and gentle, and accompanied with a smile; and though it is true they are naked, yet their manners are decorous and praiseworthy."⁶ In 1492, about eight million loosely organized Arawak inhabited the island which Columbus called Hispaniola and which constitutes present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic. By 1508, the population of Hispaniola was less than a hundred thousand. By 1518, it numbered less than twenty thousand. Scholars agree that by 1535, for all practical purposes, the native population of Hispaniola was extinct.⁷

What happened to the Arawak of Hispaniola? To some degree they were wiped out by the diseases that the Spaniards had brought with them,⁸ but that was only part of the story. The other part was that the Spaniards wanted gold; they wanted all the gold the Arawak could provide, and they wanted it quickly. To secure it, the Spaniards chose to terrorize the Indians into providing them with gold. According to Las Casas, the Spaniards "slew many Indians by hanging, burning, and being torn to pieces by savage dogs, also by cutting the hands and feet and heads and tongues, and for no other reason than to spread terror and induce the Indians to give them gold."⁹ In pursuit of this policy, the Spaniards

attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill his entrails with a single stroke of the pike. They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatching them by the arms and throwing them into rivers, roaring with laughter. . . . They made some low wide gallows on which the hanged victim's feet almost touched the ground, stringing up their victims in lots of thirteen, in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles, then set burning wood at their feet and thus burned them alive.¹⁰

Every Indian on the island of Hispaniola who was not a child was ordered to deliver to the Spanish a certain amount of precious ore

6. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Holt, 1970), p. 1.

7. Stannard, pp. 74–75.

8. Such as smallpox, measles, bubonic plague, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, yellow fever, and typhoid.

9. Bartolome De Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, trans. Herma Briffault (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 78.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

every three months. Indians who delivered the ore were given a token to wear around their necks as proof that the tribute had been paid. The quotas were so high, however, that the Indians could not meet them and maintain their food production. Consequently, many died of starvation or in their weakened condition perished more easily from the new diseases brought by the Spaniards.¹¹ In this way, the Spaniards not only depopulated Hispaniola but also the other islands of the Caribbean, such as San Juan, Jamaica, and Cuba.

In central Mexico, it is estimated that the population was about twenty-five million in 1519, when Hernando Cortes arrived. By 1595, it had been reduced by 95 percent to 1,300,000.¹² Unlike the Caribbean people whom the Spaniards first encountered, however, the inhabitants of Mexico had a good deal of experience with warfare. Even so, two factors enabled the Spaniards to dominate. First, Cortez was able to enlist rival Indian nations in his campaign against the Aztecs and their ruler, Montezuma. Thus, Cortez refers to 150,000 warriors accompanying his band of less than a thousand Spanish soldiers as they marched on the Aztecs's capitol of Tenochtitlan. Second, the Aztecs believed in declaring war and fighting it fairly; they would go so far as to send food and weapons to an enemy before attacking in order to have a worthy adversary. Consequently, they did not believe that Cortez, who professed that his intentions were peaceful, would actually attack them once his forces were within the city.¹³

With the Aztecs defeated, the Spaniards continued their search for gold. Las Casas recounts the story of a local ruler who had given the Spaniards, either of his own accord or impelled by fear, gold worth nine thousand castellanos.¹⁴ Not content with this amount, the Spaniards had the ruler bound to a stake in a sitting position with his legs extended, and set a fire to burn the soles of his feet, demanding more gold. The ruler sent to his house for more gold, and a servant brought back three thousand castellanos' worth. Not content with this, they demanded more gold. And, either because there was no more or else because the ruler was unwilling to give more, he continued to be tortured until the bone marrow came out of the soles of his feet and he died. Las Casas comments on this incident, "Such things were done to the Indians countless times, always with the aim of getting as much gold as possible from them."¹⁵ So wherever the Spaniards went, they continued their policy of terror against the Indians. Las Casas recounts, "The Spaniards cut their faces from the nose and lips down

11. Stannard, pp. 70–71.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

14. Las Casas, p. 51. One castellano was the equivalent of 4.5 grams of gold.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

to the chin and sent them in this lamentable condition, streaming with blood to carry the news of the miraculous things being done by the Spaniards. . . . [On one occasion,] seventy pairs of hands were cut off."¹⁶

With central Mexico wasted, the Spaniards moved south. In Peru and Chile, the home of the Incas, there were at least nine million inhabitants before Francisco Pizarro arrived in 1533. By the turn of the century, their number had been reduced to about five hundred thousand. Here the Spaniards, after initially dispossessing the Incas of their gold and silver, enslaved them to work either in silver mines high in the Andes Mountains or on coca plantations in the coastal lowlands. Taking the supply of Indians to be inexhaustible, the Spaniards did little to maintain the Indians laboring either in the mines or on the plantations, so that their life expectancy in each case was not much more than three or four months—about the same as the life expectancy of a slave laborer at Auschwitz in the 1940s.¹⁷

By the end of the sixteenth century, scholars estimate that about two hundred thousand Spaniards had moved to the Indies, to Mexico, and to Central and South America. Scholars also estimate that by that time between sixty million and eighty million natives from those lands were dead.¹⁸

While fewer Indians lived north of the Rio Grande, the prevailing British, and later American, attitude to these Indians was, if anything, harsher than that of the Spaniards. What the British, and later the Americans, wanted was land—the very same land that the Indians occupied. As Edward Waterhouse, a Jamestown settler, put it, “We shall enjoy their cultivated places . . . [and] their cleared grounds in all their villages (which are situated in the fruitfulest places of the land) shall be inhabited by us.”¹⁹ Specifically, the goal was to either push the Indians westward or exterminate them.

This goal was clearly endorsed at the highest levels of society. In 1779, George Washington ordered Major General John Sullivan to attack the Iroquois and “lay waste all the settlements around . . . that the country may not be merely overrun but destroyed,” urging the general not to “listen to any overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected.”²⁰ Surviving Indians referred to Washington by the nickname “Town Destroyer” because under his direct orders twenty-eight of thirty Seneca towns from Lake Erie to the Mohawk River and all the towns and villages of the Mohawk, the Onondaga, and the Cayuga were totally obliterated. As one surviving

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 110 and 125.

17. Stannard, pp. 87–89.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Iroquois told Washington to his face in 1792, "To this day, when that name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mother."²¹

This goal of removal or extermination was also shared by Adams, Monroe, and Jefferson.²² For example, Jefferson instructed his secretary of state in 1807 that any Indians who resisted American expansion must be met with "the hatchet." "And . . . if ever we are constrained to lift the hatchet against any tribe," he wrote, "we will never lay it down till that tribe is exterminated, or driven beyond the Mississippi," adding that "in war, they will kill some of us, [but] we shall destroy all of them."²³ To achieve this destruction, the British, and later the Americans, were not averse to distributing smallpox-infected blankets among the Indians as Sir Jeffrey Amherst did against Pontiac's confederation in 1763 and as the U.S. Army did to decimate the Mandans along the Missouri River in present-day South Dakota in 1836.²⁴

In 1828 Andrew Jackson, who had once written that "the whole Cherokee nation ought to be scourged," was elected president of the United States. Jackson supported the state of Georgia's attempt to appropriate a large portion of Cherokee land.²⁵ When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Jackson and the state of Georgia, Jackson had a treaty drawn up ceding the Cherokee lands to the American government in exchange for money and some land in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma. With the most influential leader of the Cherokees imprisoned and their tribal printing press shut down by the government, a treaty was negotiated with certain "cooperative" Cherokees. Yet even the American military officer who was to register the tribe's members for removal protested that this treaty was "no treaty at all, because [it was] not sanctioned by the great body of the Cherokee and [it was] made without their participation or assent. I solemnly declare to you that upon its reference to the Cherokee people it would be instantly rejected by nine-tenths of them, and I believe by nineteen-twentieths of them."²⁶ With this treaty signed, the members of the Cherokee nation were forced-marched overland to the Indian Territory, intentionally passing through areas where it was known that cholera and other epidemic diseases were raging. Thus, of the seventeen thousand who began the march, called by the Indians the Trail of Tears, only nine thousand arrived in Oklahoma.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

22. Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 331–32.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

24. Stiffarm with Lane, p. 32.

25. Stannard, p. 121 ff.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 122; Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indians* (New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 227.

Actually, in the West itself, extermination of the Indians, rather than relocation, seemed to be the preferred policy. For example, Colonel John Chivington, who led seven hundred armed soldiers in a massacre of mostly women and children at Sand Creek in Colorado in 1864, announced earlier that he wanted his troops to “kill and scalp all, little and big,” noting that “nits make lice.”²⁷ And in 1867, when Tosawi, a chief of the Comanches, introduced himself to General Philip Sheridan with “Tosawi, good Indian,” Sheridan responded with his often-quoted remark, “The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.”²⁸

There is little doubt that Chivington’s and Sheridan’s views were widely shared. For example, Oliver Wendel Holmes claimed that Indians were nothing more than a “half-filled outline of humanity” whose “extermination” was the necessary “solution to the problem of [their] relation to the white race.”²⁹ Similarly, William Dean Howells took “patriotic pride” in advocating “the extermination of the red savages of the plains.”³⁰ And Theodore Roosevelt maintained that the extermination of the American Indians and the expropriation of their lands “was as ultimately beneficial as it was inevitable.”³¹

In 1890, the U.S. government declared the period of conquest called “Indian Wars” to be officially over. At that time, it also determined that only 248,253 Indians remained alive within its borders, with another 122,585 residing in Canada.³² This represented a 98 percent decline from pre-Columbian times.

II

When we compare the conquest of the American Indians with American slavery and the Holocaust, two aspects emphasized by Thomas—number and extinction—deserve special comment. First, a greater number of American Indians lost their lives during the European conquest of North and South America than the number of blacks who lost their lives during the voyage from Africa to America—seventy-four million to ninety-four million American Indians compared to forty million to sixty million blacks. Second, not only were many Indian tribes, like the Jews, threatened with extinction, but many Indian tribes were actually driven into extinction; for example, in the state of Texas

27. Stannard, p. 131.

28. Brown, p. 170.

29. Stannard, p. 245.

30. *Ibid.*; William Dean Howells, “A Sennight of the Centennial,” *Atlantic Monthly* 38 (1876): 103.

31. Quoted in Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 78.

32. Stiffarm with Lane, p. 36.

alone, the once populous Karankawans, Akokisa, Bidui, Tejas, and Coahuiltecan are now all extinct.³³ It also should be pointed out that some African tribes were also driven into extinction by constant raids of slave traders on their villages.³⁴ Only by thinking of both Indians and Africans as members of undifferentiated groups could we fail to recognize that extinction did in fact occur. To see how inappropriate this way of viewing Indians and Africans is, notice that if Jews were similarly viewed to be simply belonging to the undifferentiated group of whites or Caucasians, they could not longer be viewed as having been threatened with extinction by the Holocaust. So more American Indians died as a result of the European conquest than did blacks as a result of the voyage from Africa to America, and just like the Jews, many American Indian tribes were threatened with extinction, but, unlike the Jews, some American Indian tribes, as well as some African tribes, were actually driven into extinction as well.

Does that imply that the conquest of the American Indians was a worse evil than the evils of American slavery or the Holocaust? Here I agree with Thomas that such conclusions are inappropriate, but not for the reason that Thomas gives. It is not because they represent quite different dimensions of evil, like numbers of deaths versus the threat of extinction, since the treatment of American Indians clearly exemplified both of these dimensions of evil. Rather, such comparative conclusions are inappropriate because all three of these evils are of such a magnitude that the focus of our attention must be elsewhere if we are to be at all respectful to those who suffered from these evils.³⁵

According to Thomas, an important difference between American slavery and the Holocaust is the way that each institution viewed its victims. American slavery, Thomas claims, viewed its victims as moral simpletons. Moral simpletons are beings who “in general cannot make the grade,” but who can also “have a sense of their own inadequacy” (p. 119). The notion of a moral simpleton is compatible with being lazy, but it “does not entail shiftlessness, as the image of a Sambo does” (p. 119). It allows for a wide array of emotions between slaves and slaveholders from “utter contempt on the part of slaveholders to undeniable feelings of outright affection between the two” (p. 119). Thomas argues that the notion of a moral simpleton is also compatible with slaves having a wide range of responsibilities, since we assign a wide range of responsibilities to children who are not fully mature (p. 119).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

34. Stannard, p. 151.

35. In one place, Thomas suggests that he might also endorse something like this reason for not comparing such evils. See p. 7.

By contrast, Thomas claims, the Holocaust viewed its victims as irredeemably evil (p. 123). While the Jewish people are recognized as having an important role in giving birth to Christianity, Thomas claims, their identification as the killers of Christ and their association with Satan, who utterly rejected God, led to the view that they are irredeemably evil (pp. 122–23). On this view, being sly and greedy are not just character defects in some Jews. Rather they are natural propensities in all Jews, which stunt their moral sensibilities (p. 124).

Thomas further notes how different these views of blacks and Jews are. Moral simpletons might do evil—for example, they might be lazy or irresponsible—but the idea of their excelling at evil, as Jews, who are characterized as irredeemably evil, are thought to do, seems inapplicable to them (pp. 124–25).

According to Thomas, the view of Jews as irredeemably evil not only prevailed during the Holocaust but also has characterized anti-Semitism wherever it has been practiced (p. 123). Presumably, Thomas also holds that the view of blacks as moral simpletons not only prevailed during American slavery but also has characterized the racist institutions and practices that succeeded it right up to the present. And while it does seem reasonable to hold that the view of blacks as moral simpletons did obtain under American slavery and does continue even to the present, I do not think, for that very reason, that it captures what was truly distinctive in the slaveholders' view of their slaves. Rather, what was truly distinctive is that they viewed black slaves as property—either their property or the property of others. Thus, while the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution did not do much for blacks, at least initially, they did decisively put an end to the idea that blacks were property. One way to mark the difference is to note the different roles played by the view of blacks as moral simpletons. Under American slavery, the view was thought to justify treating blacks as property, whereas with the end of American slavery, the view was thought to justify only other forms of discrimination against blacks.

It is also possible to note a similar difference in the roles played by the view of Jews as irredeemably evil. Thus, during the Holocaust, it was thought to justify the extermination of the Jews, but before and after the Holocaust, under anti-Semitism, it was thought to justify only other forms of coercion and discrimination. Thus, what was truly distinctive about the view of the Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust, at least in its final stages, is not the idea that Jews were irredeemably evil, but the idea of the Final Solution—the idea that the Jews should be exterminated.

Nevertheless, there is something incoherent about the idea of the Jews as irredeemably evil, particularly given the way that Thomas wants to characterize evil. In his chapter entitled “Characterizing Evil,”

Thomas gives an account of an evil act. For Thomas, an evil act must be a wrongful act, done in an appropriate way, that has the right moral gravity (pp. 72–82). He then unpacks this definition in the following way. First, an evil act being a wrongful act presupposes that the actor is a moral agent. Second, the appropriate way that an evil act must be done is intentionally, with delight, evincing a profound deadening of moral sensibilities, and stemming from hostile feelings that are not motivated by understandable factors such as passion or revenge. Third, the right moral gravity of an evil act is characterized by either inherent hideousness (e.g., a brutal rape) or quantitative hideousness (e.g., a gangland killing of a number of innocent people), or by both inherent and quantitative hideousness (e.g., the killing and brutal rape of a large number of noncombatant women in wartime).

For Thomas, once we have an account of an evil act, we can straightforwardly define an evil person as one who is often enough prone to do evil acts (p. 82). Presumably, then, an evil people is a people whose members are often enough prone to do evil acts, and an irredeemably evil people is a people whose members are irrevocably committed to doing evil acts. They are a people whose members cannot but do evil.

Yet how is it possible for there to be such a people? More specifically, how could the Jews be such a people? Thomas tries to explain the possibility by analogizing the Jews' rejection of Christ to Satan's rejection of God (pp. 123, 141–42). Just as Satan's rejection of God is irrevocable, why could the Jews' rejection of Christ not be similarly irrevocable, thus making the Jews irredeemably committed to evil. The difficulty with this explanation is that the Satan who rejected God is the very same Satan who is understood to be irrevocably opposed to God, whereas the Jews who rejected Christ two thousand years ago are different individuals from the subsequent generations of Jews that are also said to be irredeemably evil. Since on Thomas's and other accounts of evil action, an individual can only be evil as a result of the free choice of that individual, it follows that no individual could be irrevocably committed to doing evil from birth without being deprived of the free choice necessary for moral agency. Nor will it do to claim that the subsequent generations of Jews are irredeemably committed to evil because they are somehow Satan's offspring, as Thomas suggests (pp. 141–42). At worst, being Satan's offspring, or being the offspring of those who killed Christ, could have the consequence of making one irredeemably committed to doing harmful acts, but even that could be true only if one were deprived of moral agency and, hence, of one's ability to do evil acts. There is just no way for an individual to be irredeemably committed to doing evil except as a result of at least one initial free choice by that individual. No one, not even Satan's offspring, could be irredeemably committed to doing evil

from birth. Even the so-called original sin of Adam and Eve is not understood to deprive subsequent generations of their moral agency, but only, in the absence of redemption by a Messiah, of their claim to a supernatural life.³⁶ Consequently, it is impossible for the Jews' historic rejection of Christ to have as a consequence that their descendants are irredeemably evil. Hence, the view of the Jews as irredeemably evil, which played such an important role in the Holocaust, and in anti-Semitism before and after, is itself incoherent.

When we look to the view of American Indians that prevailed during the European conquest of the Americas, we discover that it shared some features of the view of blacks that prevailed during American slavery as well as some features of the view of Jews that prevailed during the Holocaust. Like blacks during slavery, American Indians were viewed as backward by the invading Europeans. Of course, there was one area where the American Indians were clearly backward—they lacked the necessary military technology to stop the Europeans from taking their land; they lacked iron and steel and, more important, the firepower of guns and cannons. Horses and ferocious dogs also gave the Spanish an enormous advantage over the Indians they faced.³⁷ To a lesser degree, the Indians also lacked the ability to organize effectively against the Europeans. Individual Indian warriors were less willing to submit to the control of their leaders, sometimes with unfortunate results. For example, when Roman Nose of the Cheyennes was planning an early morning surprise attack on a group of soldiers and scouts who had invaded Cheyenne hunting ground in search of Indian camps to attack, a few young braves alerted them to the presence of Indians by attempting to steal their horses the night before, thus reducing the effectiveness of Roman Nose's attack the next morning.³⁸ However, this lack of control by Indian leaders in war did have some beneficial side effects. Warfare between tribes never seemed to last very long, and very few lost their lives in such wars.

Of course, American Indians were viewed as backward in more than military technology and the conduct of warfare. Most of their social practices, their modes of eating and having sex, their nakedness, even their friendliness and honesty were all seen as signs of cultural backwardness by the European invaders.

Like Jews during the Holocaust, American Indians were also viewed as alien. While Jews were viewed as alien, in part, because of

36. Another effect of original sin is said to be a certain propensity to do evil, but that propensity did not necessitate that the descendants of Adam and Eve do evil. They still had moral agency and free choice (Andre-Marie Dubarle, *The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1964]).

37. Stannard, pp. 83–84.

38. Brown, pp. 163–66.

their rejection of Christianity, American Indians were viewed as alien because they were seen as heathens ignorant of Christianity. Yet while American Indians were ignorant of Christianity, they were at the same time deeply religious. Their religious views also required them to be very respectful of the natural environment in which they lived.³⁹ But these characteristics of American Indians were generally lost from view when they were seen as heathens.

So while blacks during slavery were viewed as moral simpletons who should be property and Jews during the Holocaust as a irredeemably evil people who should be exterminated, the American Indians were viewed as backward heathens who could be dispossessed, enslaved, and, if necessary, exterminated to serve the purposes of their European conquerors. Thus, because American Indians were, in fact, backward with respect to military technology, they could be more easily defeated by the militarily advanced Europeans. And because they were, in fact, heathens insofar as they lacked knowledge of Christianity, American Indians were without even the weak protection that Christendom offered its members.

These two factors, being backward and being heathen, therefore, worked against American Indians to deprive them of their lands and possessions, their freedom and their lives. These factors enabled the Spaniards to dispossess and enslave and massacre American Indians in their fanatical pursuit of gold and silver. Later, these same factors enabled the British and their successors, the Americans, to dispossess Indians of their land by pushing them westward, slaughtering them whenever possible, and driving certain Indian tribes to extinction.

In developing his comparison of American slavery and the Holocaust, Thomas points out that American slavery sought cooperation from blacks to a much greater extent than the Holocaust sought cooperation from the Jews (p. 125 ff.). For example, blacks were entrusted with the roles of nannies and cooks. However, in the early stages of the Holocaust, the Nazis also sought, and generally received, significant cooperation from the Jews with respect to the various restrictions and taxes that they imposed on them.⁴⁰ Only in the final stages of

39. James P. Sterba, *Contemporary Social and Political Philosophy* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995), pp. 101–5.

40. There is a problem of how to date the beginning of the Holocaust and its commitment to the extermination of the Jews. Thomas puts the beginning at 1938 with Kristallnacht. I have no objection to this as long as it is granted that most probably the Nazi leaders were not committed to the extermination of the Jews from the very beginning. I believe that some form of removal and emigration most likely would have been acceptable at the beginning of the Nazi regime. However, after the Russian invasion and the adoption of the Final Solution in 1941, the commitment to extermination had been clearly made.

the Holocaust was the cooperation required of the Jews extremely minimal.

Thomas also sees a striking incongruity in the way that blacks were treated during American Slavery (p. 127 ff.). The incongruity is that their full humanity was denied while they were entrusted with responsible positions of cooks and nannies. But I am not sure that there is any incongruity here. The jobs of cooks and nannies, although they did require considerable talent, were likely to be underestimated by slaveholders, given that these were jobs performed by women, and the fact that a deep sexism characterized Southern society, as Thomas himself notes (p. 131 ff.). Thus, assuming that the skill required for these jobs tended to be underestimated in Southern society, it would certainly seem possible for slaveholders to see the fulfillment of these roles as consistent with their view of blacks as moral simpletons, and, consequently, to find nothing incongruous in their fulfilling such roles.

Of course, I am not denying that there were tensions. There are always times, even within the most sexist societies, when men are forced to recognize the importance of the contributions that women, slave or free, make. It is just that I have difficulty locating here the "profound moral incongruity" in the slaveholder's beliefs that Thomas claims to see.

Actually, what Thomas seems to find most incongruous is the failure of slaveholders to show gratitude for a lifetime of service, especially to slaves who fulfilled the important role of nannies (pp. 36–37). But while some form of gratitude certainly was appropriate, the type of gratitude that Thomas endorses, in quoting the view of Frederick Douglass, required giving nannies their freedom. Seeing this as the appropriate form of gratitude, however, may have been beyond the reach of many slaveholders, particularly if they thought that their view that blacks were moral simpletons either justified or required enslavement for their own good.⁴¹ It should also be noted that in defending this view, slaveholders were simply being good Aristotelians, as a well-known apologist at the time was happy to point out.⁴² For these reasons, it is difficult to find a profound moral incongruity in the slaveholder's practice of assigning certain blacks more responsible positions, provided that the slaveholders thought that this was consis-

41. According to Thomas, while slaveholders thought that blacks were moral simpletons, they may not have thought that it was good for blacks to be treated as moral simpletons, but only that it would be foolish to treat them in any other way (p. 135). I am not sure that I understand this. Why would it not be good for blacks to be treated as moral simpletons if that is what they were? It seems to me that if blacks were moral simpletons, there would be some good way to treat them as such.

42. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All or Slaves without Masters in Ante-Bellum*, ed. Harvey Wish (New York: Putnam, 1960), p. 108.

tent with their view of blacks as moral simpletons. A more promising critical approach might be to explore what reasons slaveholders had for accepting the view that blacks were moral simpletons in the first place, and why they thought that slavery was good for blacks despite their continual resistance to it.⁴³

Nor surprisingly, the degree of cooperation sought from American Indians by their European conquerors was generally closer to what was expected of Jews during the Holocaust than to what was expected of blacks during American slavery. Of course, at the very early stages of the European conquest, especially in North America, a high level of cooperation and even friendship with American Indians was essential to the survival of the European settlements. But, as the European conquest pressed on, cooperation with American Indians became less and less necessary, and also less and less desirable, until, as it was with the Jews, at least at the last stages of the Holocaust, cooperation was neither necessary nor desirable at all.

One feature that Thomas claims significantly distinguishes American slavery from the Holocaust is natal alienation (p. 150 ff.). According to Thomas, "There is natal alienation in the lives of an ethnic group when the social practices of the society into which they are born forcibly prevent most of them from fully participating in, and thus having a secure knowledge of their historical-cultural traditions" (p. 150). Employing this concept, Thomas claims that blacks were natally alienated by slavery whereas Jews were not natally alienated by the Holocaust. Thomas further uses this concept to explain why blacks languished after slavery while the Jews flourished after the Holocaust. Since Jews were not natally alienated, they had available to them a historical-cultural tradition that, in Thomas's words, provided "socially unencumbered group affirmation." According to Thomas, having this socially unencumbered group affirmation enabled Jews to flourish in ways that blacks because of their natal alienation were unable to do.

Now Thomas allows that the concept of natal alienation is a difficult one. While he claims to be borrowing this concept from Orlando Patterson, Thomas actually seems to have transformed the notion that Patterson used by requiring that the natally alienated be prevented from birth from having a secure knowledge of their historical-cultural traditions.⁴⁴ Understood in this way, it would certainly appear that

43. George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), chap. 6.

44. Thomas's transformed account of natal alienation enables him to avoid the criticism of Patterson's account that blacks in the Americas were not natally alienated as Patterson defines the term. For this criticism of Patterson, see Howard McGary and Bill Lawson, *Between Slavery and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 4.

blacks have been natively alienated, and that Jews have not been wherever they have had a realistic option of immersing themselves in the continuing Jewish religious tradition. Yet it also seems to be the case that the descendants of many of the members of various ethnic and nationality groups who immigrated to the U.S. were also natively alienated from their historical-cultural traditions by the social and economic pressures imposed upon their immigrant forefathers and foremothers to assimilate into the dominant American culture(s).⁴⁵ Accordingly, what seems most important is not whether or not one has been natively alienated, but rather what goes along with that alienation. Thus, if people who are natively alienated are also provided with good opportunities to develop themselves and become respectable members of society, the fact that they have been natively alienated will be not very important. It is for this reason that I think that it was the lessening of discrimination against the Jews following the Holocaust combined with their ability to pass so as to avoid some of the discrimination that remained, more than it was the absence of natal alienation, that enabled Jews to flourish. Correspondingly, I think that blacks in the United States are held back far more by various forms of discrimination and their inability to pass so as to avoid that discrimination than they are held back by being natively alienated, although when all these constraints are combined, as they currently are in the United States, they do constitute a significant barrier to the flourishing of blacks.

Not surprisingly, Thomas's idea of natal alienation also has application to American Indians. Tribe after tribe was forced to give its native lands to make room for the influx of Europeans. Even tribes that survived were decimated. In the final stages of the European conquest, American Indian children were taken from their parents at early ages, sent to boarding schools, and educated in "white" ways.⁴⁶ As a director of one of these schools put it, the goal was to "kill the Indian . . . and save the man." In 1887, more than fourteen thousand Indian children were enrolled in such boarding schools. When the students eventually returned to their reservations, they were virtual strangers, unable to speak their own language or understand the ways of their people.⁴⁷

Even these severe forms of natal alienation might have been compensated for if American Indians had been provided with good opportunities to develop themselves and become respectable members of society. But this did not happen. Currently, the poverty rate on Ameri-

45. Whether there is one dominant American culture or a set of overlapping dominant or acceptable American cultures is a large question that I cannot consider here.

46. Sharon O'Brien, *American Tribal Governments* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 76.

47. *Ibid.*

can Indians' reservations in the United States is almost four times the national average, and on some reservations, such as Pine Ridge in South Dakota and Tohomo O'Odham in Arizona (where more than 60 percent of homes are without adequate plumbing, compared with 2 percent for the nation at large), the poverty rate is nearly five times the national average.⁴⁸ As late as 1969, the average life expectancy for an Indian was forty-four years, compared to sixty-five for a non-Indian.⁴⁹ The suicide rate among young Indians aged 15-24 years is also around 200 percent above the national average for the same age group, and the rate for alcohol-caused mortality is more than 900 percent higher than the national average. The destitution and ill health that prevails on many reservations today is similar to conditions in the Third World.⁵⁰ American Indians today suffer not only from natal alienation but from extreme social and economic injustice as well.

III

Beyond describing and contrasting American slavery and the Holocaust, Thomas seeks to understand the evil they represent. This leads him to the general question of why people do evil. Thomas seeks to explain how evil is possible without having recourse to the view that human beings are naturally evil. According to Thomas, human beings are neither naturally evil nor naturally saintly but rather fragilely good (p. 14 ff.). They are good because they are not generally disposed to harm others. Nor do they delight in causing suffering to others, but rather they are generally disposed to help others and eliminate their suffering. They are fragile, however, in that things can easily prevent their natural propensities from being realized or can readily frustrate their operation.

There is considerable merit in Thomas's characterization of human nature as neither naturally evil nor naturally saintly but fragilely good, but it initially faces a problem that needs to be remedied. Thomas wants to show how fragilely good human beings can do evil acts, yet given his accounts of an evil act and fragile goodness, this would not seem to be possible. Fragile goodness requires that humans generally not enjoy harming others, but, as Thomas characterizes an evil act, it does require that the agent delight in harming others. Although not straightforwardly contradictory, these two views do not cohere well, so I suggest dropping the requirement that agents who perform evil acts must delight in harming others.⁵¹

48. Stannard, pp. 256–57.

49. O'Brien, p. 77.

50. Stannard, p. 257.

51. There are also other conditions that Thomas imposes on an evil act that need to be weakened, like evincing a profound deadening of moral sensibilities and stemming from hostile feelings, but I will not pursue this matter more here.

To illustrate the fragility of human goodness, Thomas develops the story of General Sanchez (p. 28 ff.). General Sanchez discovers that an officer, who has an otherwise spectacular record, plagiarized on an entrance examination ten years ago. This officer turns out to be Smith, who is a long-time friend of the Sanchez family. Thomas maintains that if Sanchez chooses to protect Smith, she acts reasonably but wrongly. Does Thomas intend to suggest by this that if Sanchez chooses to act rightly, she would also be acting unreasonably? Clearly, it would be problematic to associate acting morally with acting unreasonably unless one takes "reasonable action" to be something like "narrowly self-interested action." Maybe all that Thomas intends here is that there are two ways for Sanchez to act reasonably—either shielding Smith or turning her in. It is just that one of these acts is right and the other is wrong.⁵²

A problem with this interpretation, however, is that it implies that a person could be acting fully in accord with reason yet acting wrongly as well. So I prefer to construe Sanchez as facing a moral dilemma such that whichever way she acts, in some sense she acts wrongly. If Sanchez protects Smith, she fails to carry out her duty to expose official misdeeds, and this is wrong. If she exposes Smith, then she fails to carry out her duty to help a family friend in need, and this is wrong. What does morality require in such a situation? I think that it requires weighing the wrongs and choosing the least wrong. In this case, choosing the least wrong turns out to be the right thing to do. In the case of Sanchez, I think the right thing for her to do is to shield Smith and forget about the earlier plagiarism. I also take this to be the most reasonable thing for Sanchez to do.⁵³ Now, of course, my view about what Sanchez should do changes when Thomas alters the example. So when what Sanchez is said to discover about Smith is that she routinely accepts bribes from suppliers, my judgment changes. Here I think the right thing for Sanchez to do is to expose Smith. Sanchez's duty to help a family friend cannot outweigh her duty to expose this continuous wrongdoing.

Unfortunately, this alternative evaluation of Thomas's example undermines its usefulness in showing how evil is possible. What Thomas intended to illustrate with this example is how morally decent people, like General Sanchez, could get themselves involved in doing wrong, that is, in doing evil. However, according to my evaluation of the example, if Sanchez acts most reasonably she does not really do

52. I actually do not think that this is Thomas's view about all such cases, but I will take this up shortly.

53. I also think that this is the case if Smith is a stranger to Sanchez (another version of the example that Thomas considers) given the lapse of ten years' time and the fact that Smith during that time has compiled a spectacular record.

something that is wrong, all things considered, and so she is not doing evil, at least she is not doing evil, all things considered. Of course, if Smith is routinely taking bribes, and Sanchez protects her, then Sanchez would be doing something wrong and, hence, doing something evil. But in this version of the example, we could raise doubts about whether Sanchez, so characterized, is really a morally decent person.

A more promising example to which Thomas appeals to show how morally decent people can come to do evil is Stanley Milgram's experiment (pp. 36–39). In this well-known experiment, almost two-thirds of the participants followed orders and administered what they thought were increasingly more potent shocks to another human subject of the experiment.⁵⁴ How are we to evaluate their actions? Obviously, they had a duty not to inflict severe pain on another human being, and because they consented, they also had a duty to do what they were ordered to do. It was *prima facie* wrong not to fulfill each of these duties, but the first duty should have been seen to be more weighty. It was the right thing to do, all things considered. But almost two-thirds of the participants in the experiment did not do what was right, all things considered. They did what they should have recognized to be evil. Thomas agrees that most of the participants acted wrongly, and did evil, but he seems to want to conclude that they acted reasonably as well.

Clearly, the results of the Milgram experiment are deeply troubling, and they do seem to show how ordinary people can be led to participate in evil acts, even in intensely evil acts. But maybe we should not embrace this latter conclusion too quickly. In the experiment, each participant was present when the subject who was to receive the shocks actually consented to take part in the experiment. In addition, what the participants were asking the subject to do was make some fairly easy word associations. So when the subject failed to make these associations, as, by design, he frequently did, many of the participants thought the subject was just being stubborn in not giving the right answer, and so deserved to be shocked. Finally, when the participants raised questions about the shocks, they were told that although the shocks were painful, there was no permanent tissue damage from them. Since none of these features of the Milgram experiment usually obtain in cases where people would be wrongfully harming others, their presence in the experiment could have made it difficult for the participants to recognize the wrongness of their actions. Moreover, Milgram reports that all but a few of the participants left genuinely and deeply troubled over what they had done. Maybe, then, if these participants were asked to participate in such experiments in the future, they

54. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

would refuse. On the other hand, what if participation in Milgram-like practices were required for preserving one's life or advancing one's career? Would these substantial personal benefits clearly overwhelm any moral qualms the participants had?

According to Thomas, the existence of a certain sort of community helps explain how people can do evil (p. 44 ff.). This sort of community is characterized by what Thomas calls a *laissez-faire* commonsense morality. According to this morality, one's basic duty to strangers is a duty not to harm them. No one has a duty to help strangers except in the most minimal and risk-free way that would almost never make one worse off; one's basic duty to help is primarily directed at family and friends. Thomas claims that evil is possible because too often the communities that we form are characterized by just such a *laissez-faire* commonsense morality—a morality that is insufficiently concerned about the welfare of others.

Yet is a community with a *laissez-faire* commonsense morality really open to more evil acts by its members as Thomas claims? In such a community, one's duty to strangers is basically limited to not harming them. There is no strong duty to do good to people, and without such a duty, Thomas suggests, it will be more likely that people will do evil because there will be no general obligation to prevent harm to others. But if each of us does not take any steps to prevent harm to others, it may not be too long before those doing the harming come smashing through our own front doors. So it would seem to be even in everyone's narrow self-interest to support some type of prevention/punishment system to deter and contain those who would harm others. At least to this extent, therefore, everyone should be committed to preventing harm to others.

There are also many cases where it may look like one is just omitting to do something, like omitting to benefit someone, where one is actually doing something, like harming the very person that one thought one was just not benefiting. For example, while we may think that we are just omitting to help homeless people in our city, we may in fact be harming them by supporting a police force which keeps the homeless from commandeering adequate housing for themselves, housing which may exist, for example, in our own basements and attics. These coercive activities of the police clearly do make the homeless worse off, and since Thomas defines making someone worse off as harming them, they would, on his account, be harming the homeless.⁵⁵ So too when many non-Jewish Germans prevented Ger-

55. I actually think that Thomas's account of harming someone is too broad, but introducing a narrower notion will not defeat the substance of the objection because one can always ask: What justifies interfering or supporting interference with the poor

man Jews from taking refuge from the Nazis in their homes, they were making those Jews worse off, and so harming them as well.⁵⁶ What this suggests is that even a laissez-faire commonsense morality has considerable resources within it for condemning and preventing the doing of evil in society.

Thomas contrasts a community with a laissez-faire morality with a community that accepts a strong duty to help strangers in need (p. 65 ff.). He offers as an example of such a community the village of Le Chambon, which managed to save thousands of Jews from the Nazis. He also claims that such a community is more in accord with his preferred conception of human beings as fragilely good. I think that Thomas is correct in claiming that a community which accepts a strong duty to help strangers will also succeed in preventing the doing of evil, but I would also suggest that when the actual moral requirements of a laissez-faire community are worked out, they may not be all that different from those of a community which accepts a strong duty to help strangers, and so the actual potential of both communities for preventing evil should turn out to be about the same.⁵⁷

But if communities that focus on not doing harm, correctly understood, turn out to be just as socially responsible as those that focus on doing good, how is it possible for morally decent people to do evil? Thomas argues that morally decent people end up doing evil because they do not morally disassociate themselves from evil institutions as much as they should (p. 108 ff.). According to Thomas, moral disassociation is a form of moral resistance. It may involve doing nothing, or feigning incompetence, or clandestinely doing something different from what one is ordered to do, but it does not require that we in any way openly criticize the institution from which we are disassociating ourselves. Nor does it require that we have standing or leverage with those whose behavior we disapprove of, and we can also easily engage in it without our superiors realizing that we are actually critical of the institution in question. Thomas thinks that the duty to morally disassociate is inescapable, always reasonably expected of people, and if it were practiced by a sufficient number of people, it would actually succeed in undermining evil institutions. Thomas cites as an example of someone who engaged in moral disassociation Ernest B., a Nazi doctor in Auschwitz who did not participate in the selections and was called by survivors of the Holocaust "a human being in an SS uniform."

in these ways? For further discussion, see my article "From Liberty to Welfare," *Ethics* 105 (1994): 64–98.

56. Notice that this is not an argument that acts are morally equivalent to omissions, a view on which Thomas proposes not to take a stand (p. 49), but simply an argument that the class of *acts* is much broader than many have thought and this fact has some interesting moral implications.

57. For further argument on this point, see my "From Liberty to Welfare."

I agree with Thomas that moral disassociation is an important form of moral protest. I just think that people are often morally required to do more than disassociate themselves from evil institutions. In fact, notice that in Milgram's experiment, the participants could not even have engaged in moral disassociation. After all, they could not have feigned inability to turn the knob they thought caused the shocks, as Thomas himself notes (p. 41). There was just no way for them to morally distance themselves from the experiment without openly challenging its goals. Thomas also agrees that the participants in the Milgram experiment acted wrongly. I take this to mean that there must have been something else that was reasonable for them to do; in fact, in my view, it must have been some action that was even more reasonable for them to do. Since this could not have been an act of moral disassociation, some stronger form of moral protest must have been morally required, and terminating the experiment seems to be the likely possibility.

Thomas disagrees with this because he holds that in the Milgram experiment it would have been unreasonable to expect the participants to act rightly (p. 42). But if we adopt Thomas's view here—the view that reason conclusively recommends against morality in hard cases, like the Milgram experiment—it is difficult to see how we can justifiably blame people for failing to be moral in such cases even when serious harm is being done to others. In effect, we would be saying that during American slavery, or during the Holocaust, or during the conquest of the American Indians, some people acted evilly by harming others, but they could not be justifiably blamed for their actions because it was not reasonable to expect them to act differently. This is not the sort of explanation of evil I want to endorse.

According to the alternative explanation of evil that I have been developing, if someone acted wrongly, and thus acted evilly, there must have been some way she could have acted rightly, and acting rightly must have been the most reasonable thing for her to do. Of course, I agree with Thomas that sometimes acting rightly will involve simply performing acts of moral disassociation. Nevertheless, I think that moral dissociation by itself will not be all that effective at undermining evil institutions because it is hard to see how an evil institution could be effectively undermined without those in charge recognizing that anyone was critical of it. Moral disassociation surely can contribute to the undermining of evil institutions, but stronger forms of protest are usually required to complete the job.

Actually, Thomas himself suggests that stronger forms of protest were morally required to try to stop the Holocaust. For example, he suggests that other nations could have protested the early Nazi treatment of the Jews by expressing their willingness to open their doors to Jewish immigrants. When at the Evian Conference Hitler asked if

any nations were willing to take in German Jews, no one responded affirmatively. Thomas suggests that a strong affirmative response at that juncture might have avoided the Final Solution (pp. 55–56). Thomas also reflects upon whether there would have been a Final Solution if Germans had effectively opposed the euthanasia program that Hitler initiated in 1939 (p. 112).

Now I agree wholeheartedly with Thomas that the general failure of countries to respond to Nazi persecution by opening up their countries to Jewish immigration was morally reprehensible. In 1941, the United States actually limited immigration to a trickle just as the news of Nazi atrocities against the Jews began to leak out.⁵⁸ With respect to Hitler's euthanasia program, however, what is most interesting is that even though the program was quite secret, Germans, particularly prominent German Christians, did find out about it, and did publicly oppose it, and, in fact, succeeded in getting the program suspended.⁵⁹ So effective opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program did not prevent the Final Solution, but it does raise the question of why Germans were able to muster effective public opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program, while they registered virtually no public opposition at all to the Holocaust.

So how do we explain the evil that people do? In many cases, the explanation is all too easy. Many people simply give up on morality and reason altogether, except for a fairly narrow self-interested or group-interested conception of reason, for the benefits that doing evil provides. This was true of many Spanish conquistadors, American slaveholders, European settlers, and Nazi SS officers. About this, both Thomas and I agree. Explaining why morally evil people do evil is not that difficult. What is difficult is explaining why morally decent people do evil. Thomas's explanation is that in really difficult cases, reason and morality come apart. In such cases, what is right to do is *not* what it is most reasonable to do. Morality recommends one thing and reason another. So we cannot morally blame a person for doing evil because it would have been unreasonable for that person to act otherwise. Therefore, the evil that morally decent people do is explained by their following reason rather than morality.

On my view, even in the most difficult cases, reason and morality do not come apart; they always support each other. In all cases, what is most reasonable to do is what is right to do. When morally decent

58. David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 5–6.

59. Nora Levin, *The Holocaust* (New York: Crowell, 1968), pp. 301–3; John Roth, "On Losing Trust in the World," in *The Holocaust*, ed. John Roth and Michael Berenbaum, pp. 243–44; and Richard Grunberger, "Euthanasia," in *The Holocaust Years*, ed. Roselle Chartock and Jack Spencer (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 139.

people do evil, therefore, what they do is to temporarily depart from both reason and morality for the sake of the benefits that doing evil provides. Since they are acting against both reason and morality, they can be morally blamed for the evil they do. Moreover, given that both reason and morality are always opposed to evil, there is a significant constraint on the frequency and amount of evil that morally decent people can do.⁶⁰

Let us now apply Thomas's and my alternative explanations of how evil is possible to American slavery, the Holocaust and the conquest of the American Indians. Thomas's explanation will allow that there will be many morally decent people occupying key roles in each of these social evils. We will be able to say these people did wrong, and hence that they did evil, but we will not be able to morally blame them for what they did because they could not have reasonably acted otherwise. On Thomas's view, however, we would be able to blame morally evil people who have given up on both morality and reason, because many of the evil acts they perform will, in fact, be condemned by both reason and morality. In contrast, on my explanation, there will *not* be many morally decent people occupying key roles in American slavery, the Holocaust, and the conquest of the American Indians, given the limit to the frequency and amount of evil morally decent people can do. It will, however, be possible to morally blame morally decent people who do occupy such roles, or who in other ways contribute to these social evils. It will also be possible to morally condemn those morally evil people who occupied key roles in these social evils because they too could have acted in accord with both reason and morality. While Thomas's explanation of how evil is possible allows for a greater participation of morally decent people in American slavery, the Holocaust, and the conquest of the American Indians, it limits our ability to morally blame these people. By contrast, my explanation of how evil is possible allows us to morally blame morally decent people who participated in any of these three social evils but limits the possibility that those who occupied key roles in these social evils were actually morally decent people.

In the first chapter of *Vessels of Evil*, Thomas justifies his choice of American slavery and the Holocaust for his comparative study simply on his own personal moral sensitivities (pp. 3–4). He allows that others with different sensitivities might choose differently. One reason that I have had for wanting to introduce the conquest of the American Indians into Thomas's comparative study is the historical connections

60. Of course, many people who are not morally decent still claim to be such. Some of this is wishful thinking (wishing to do evil without getting the name for it), but some of it is just the (culpable) failure to recognize how difficult it is to be moral.

between these three social evils. Historically, the conquest of the American Indians began first, but it, in turn was affected by events in Spain. In 1492, as Columbus set sail for the New World, Jews, ultimately 120,000–150,000, were being deported from Spain, and, on subsequent trips, Columbus brought with him heavily armed and armored infantry and cavalry fresh from their victory over the Moors in Granada.⁶¹ The Spaniards were ready to conquer the New World, and conquer it they did by massacring, enslaving, and decimating all the groups of Indians with whom they came in contact. With the region depopulated, blacks were brought in as slaves to work on the newly developed sugarcane plantations.⁶² In the seventeenth century, blacks were also brought as slaves to North America in the same sort of extremely packed ships in which indentured white servants were brought from England. As black slaves proved to be more economically profitable than indentured white servants, their numbers began to grow relative to the numbers of indentured white servants. The same money which procured an indentured white servant's services for ten years could buy a black for life.⁶³ Or as the governor of Barbados put it, "three blacks work better and cheaper than one white man."⁶⁴ American slavery thus became the South's peculiar institution. When needed, the conquest of the American Indians and American slavery could also be paralleled to provide mutual justification. Subsequently, in the twentieth century, the treatment of the American Indians was used by Nazi leaders to justify inflicting the Holocaust on the Jews. According to Hitler, "Neither Spain nor Britain should be models of German expansion, but the Nordics of North America, who had ruthlessly pushed aside an inferior race to win for themselves soil and territory for the future."⁶⁵ Similarly, Heinrich Himmler explained to a confidant that he knew that the Final Solution would mean much suffering for the Jews. But he pointed to what the Americans had done earlier, which was to exterminate the Indians—who only wanted to go on living in their native land—in the most abominable way.⁶⁶ So relating the conquest of the American Indians, American slavery, and the Holocaust together can help us understand evil not only conceptually but historically as well.

Laurence Mordekhai Thomas's *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* is an inspiring book. Thomas sees it as a "small beginning

61. Stannard, pp. 62, 202.

62. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Putnam, 1966), chap. 1.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. See Rich Norman, *Hitler's War Aims: Ideology, the Nazi State, and the Course of Expansion* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 8.

66. Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The Comparable Crime* (New York: Putnam, 1967), p. 45.

in a dialogue that has not yet taken place" (p. xvii). It is far more than that. It is a major contribution to understanding evil through a comparative study of American slavery and the Holocaust. Inspired by Thomas's work, I have tried to extend his comparison to include the conquest of the American Indians so as to better understand the nature of these social evils and to better appreciate and evaluate Thomas's claims about how these social evils were possible. The extent to which I have succeeded in this undertaking directly corresponds to the extent to which I am indebted to Thomas's inspiring and groundbreaking work.