

Evil is Business as Usual: An Essay on Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*

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I: Introduction

McCarthy *seems* to raise “the problem of evil” in a secular fashion and in a relatively direct way in his novel *No Country for Old Men*. The “problem of evil” here means the ongoing human struggle against evil within ourselves and our social world (which are finally inseparable). But, of course, this “problem” never meets with any kind of reasonable solution (in any sense) until we comprehend *the nature of evil*. What is it? How does it form and evolve within ourselves and society? What, finally, can we do to stop it? There are multiple answers out there, especially within philosophical discourse, but most of these answers are highly abstract and general, as it always is with philosophy.

A *great story* about evil embeds and embodies evil within the world and within consciousness. In any great narrative about evil, action *is* consciousness; we cannot, in other words, look for the nature of evil simply within states of consciousness narrowly construed (say, as the “content of mind”). Human acts are inseparable from mental states and they are more than “clues” or “symptoms” of what is happening “on the inside”. As human beings who constantly engage with others (by necessity) we understand the basic point that consciousness and mind are analytically contained in action. We necessarily require this truth of human reality as we make hypotheses about the nature of evil within narratives or we will be reduced to incoherence or absurd mystery.

McCarthy's book is saturated by doom, dread, and palpable fear, ways of being that seem to follow from a pervasive evil. There is no place within the story to escape from the sense of a world falling apart as evil moves ever closer to the center of what constitutes human well-being. It is not that everyone is becoming evil- as in some sort of horror show or movie- but rather the evil in question is surrounding what we might call “culture”: the resources available for all kinds of human improvement. An ever-present background of evil, as if evil threatens the eco-system, takes hold early in the novel. But our task here is not simply a generalized description or overall feeling that the narrative conveys. Our task is to provide some reasonable hypotheses concerning *how this comes about*. In the real world, with real people, and dealing with the concrete, there is no development from nothing. Something must exist first in order for the evil to evolve or form; hence, we are looking for the causal source of the evil. Secondly, and more importantly, we cannot hypothesize anything about the source of the evil until we know its nature. But, and this is a good thing for the inquiry, the source of the evil reveals its nature. I mean, more plainly, that evil contains its source as part of its nature. We should expect this on strictly empirical grounds. An ecology is caused by its components and also, obviously enough, contains its components. This point is entirely consistent with my above claim that “something must exist first” for the evil to develop. It is consistent because components evolve while remaining components.

Let me push harder at the above inquiry. McCarthy describes a world where there are no straightforward “moral dilemmas in the face of evil” because this world seems to have evolved to the point where moral struggles are no longer even possible. Now, this claim may seem over the line, too far, or even some weird

science fiction (in other words, we would not recognize these beings or this world): the point is synonymous with the idea that *our resources for dealing with evil have dwindled to the point of no return and this is another way of describing the evil itself*. And, again, what we need for the story to be about the world and not some futuristic nightmare, are hypotheses or inferences to the best explanation for the nature and existence of this evil that can, in fact, be construed as empirically plausible (as existing in our present world). In other words: what makes this evil possible?

I mention these points by way of introduction because I think they are basic to understanding the problem of evil presented, but also because McCarthy does play close to categorical boundaries. The infamous assassin Anton Chigurh, our main puzzle for the answers we seek, is very nearly unbelievable as a human agent. I do not, however, think this is an imaginative failure of “unrealistic possibilities”; it is instead, an inevitable feature of pushing toward an evolution of human evil and human normative failure. Somehow, this creature emerges and he does not emerge as “the pure embodiment of evil” because this level of abstraction is self-defeating within a narrative and it bears no relationship to reality. To really care about this narrative as a piece of realism (as it certainly is) requires that we stay within the boundary of natural categories while at the same time pushing them. If this is not the case then lots of things go up in smoke, especially my notion or large hypothesis that “evil” has somehow evolved (from what to what is the hard part). McCarthy is really playing close to imaginative boundaries (and not just natural categories): *the narrative often reads like a well founded and dreaded prediction*.

The ideas I am depending on are an ecological ontology of persons and human circumstance; these ideas strongly resist the atomization of agency/identity and the libertarian construct of “free-will.” The fact that they resist these two pieces of western mythology is going to be crucial as we look at the nature of evil in the narrative. But the content of an ecological ontology of persons as it first relates to Chigurh is relatively simple. An entity, including a human being, cannot be within the world, in multiple ways relating to the world (other people, the environment) and not “belong to the world”: in other words, Chigurh’s origins and ongoing existence depend on many facts about the world and not just himself, even as he may think or other persons may think that he is “outside of everything.” It will be the ongoing idea in this essay, even as it is difficult and somewhat experimental, that the root cause of Chigurh’s evil is his understanding of himself that he does, in fact, stand *outside of everything*. The root cause of evil is then in the endeavor to escape our belonging to the world. It may even be the case, as we push the inquiry, that “free-will” is part of the urge to escape the world (and contingency, dependence on others, etc.). I endeavor, in the following pages to give substantial content to these ideas.

Now before moving on to a microscopic look at Chigurh and his relation to others, I want and need to explain the above idea that the world of *No Country for Old Men* seems to have lost the *conditions for morality*. In anyone who still understands those conditions, this world must provoke dread and fear. Indeed, this is precisely the way Ed Tom, the old moralist and old school sheriff, sees and feels things. Consider a homely analogy. Suppose I move into a new neighborhood and after some days hanging around I notice that it is not neighborly, but I also see reasons for thinking that, with some effort on everyone’s part, the place could become neighborly. Perhaps, in some pathetically simple way, this is an aspect of how we think of evil: as something we can understand and overcome (at least to a great extent) through effort toward the normative and the good. Now consider another scenario and see if it sinks into consciousness or squares with any experience. Suppose the same set up and yet in this case I conclude, with some evidence, that the lack of neighborliness is *itself sufficient* for the impossibility of neighborliness. What does this mean? And it also looks as if understanding the evidence for the conclusion would be analogous for understanding the nature of evil as

it rips away the conditions of morality. The greatest mistake, in my judgment, often existing within the problem of evil, is the ongoing presupposition that the *conditions for morality always somehow hold within persons and the social world*.

One last point is necessary before moving forward. No doubt, when an evil such as the reality of Chigurh is seen and felt, we tend toward a mental and emotional rampage of overt and conscious disassociation. This goes on constantly. Whether it is a serial killer, or a child molester, or even a money manager who steals millions, we tend to distance ourselves in the sense that “the criminal is distinct from me in basically all respects.” And we can do this in a somewhat responsible way. As a law-abiding and honest person, I know at the very least, that I would not ever bilk my neighbor of his money and so on. This is often true enough. But as we move beyond, that is as we move into an understanding of the whole and not just particulars, we must search for ecological principles that allowed for the conditions of those criminals and to think it had nothing to do with what *we all created over time and in relation to what had been created and sustained in the past*, we just become immature and ridiculous. Bernie Madoff, in other words, emerged from a world of gross corruption that is surely related - in some way - to all aspects of the society. Likewise then Chigurh may be some kind of “monster”, a sort of being that emerged from the ooze, but he is our monster and we need to own him and the ooze he formed from. And McCarthy goes farther in the thoughts of Ed Tom: we all should have seen him coming.

II: We Should Have Seen Him Coming

Moss walks into the results of a gunfight, finds two million plus dollars, and decides to take it knowing full well “they” will very probably pursue him. In the middle of nowhere (Texas scrub) he steps into a web of connections made possible by the mix between the legal and illegal economies. The very notion that all this mess, all these dead bodies, is just about crazy Mexican drug dealers is absurd or even contradictory (they are more like victims). For Moss, the issue is really: can he escape detection and so filter himself out of the web of connections? Moss sinks his own ship with an act of compassion, a similar act leads to his death; what he does not understand is that these are connections that do not allow for the possibility of moral acts (like bringing a gunshot victim a drink of water). And Moss probably thought Vietnam was hell.

The narrative certainly bears out my hypothesis here about the mix between the legal and illegal economy. Such a mix is important because it blurs the boundaries to the point where we might not be able to tell the difference or it could blur the boundaries so far that “the law” or “what is legal” becomes a hoax. Ed Tom, in his litany of fears, knows -for sure -that lawlessness has existed forever. Certainly, there are enough “bad people” out there “who cannot be governed” but they are not all easily detected as criminal socio-paths. Chigurh’s work finally takes him to skyscrapers, all with the appearance of being above board offices. But this “blurring of the lines” is a crucial piece of the puzzle because a law that functions, at least to protect citizens, is the very basic maintenance of social sanity. In this narrative we are totally lost with respect to this bottom line feature of normative human reality as Chigurh and others lay waste to towns, stores, and people in broad daylight.

But then what explains the lawlessness? It seems I can use the lawlessness to give a hypothesis for the bloody mess out in the scrub, but then I am in the difficult circumstance of having to explain how this mixture of the legal and illegal came into being (and claiming it is caused by “bad people” is just circular). We need something drastic because the narrative is drastic and if it is real we then need something plausibly real.

“Capitalism” and its residual forms (the inevitable desire to take control over wealth and power and the mechanisms for taking control and power), *which exist anywhere and everywhere in the world*, already contain this mix within their nature. Great “entrepreneurs” can create demands and not just fill them and this is exactly “the drug trade.” And the drug trade is going to interest any number of “legitimate” and “legal” companies and operations; even governments who wage war on drugs and drug dealers have been consistently implicated. We explain the large pieces of lawlessness as having emerged from the complete (and practically necessary) a-morality of all profit making ventures and systems. Chigurh first and foremost emerges out of this deep and broad possibility and reality of human social and cultural corruption where even those meant to defend the laws violate them (almost always for money). The extent of the mayhem, the amount of money, and the consistent supply and demand for drugs in the face of a “war on drugs” confirms this hypothesis. But “corruption” of this sort is very nearly a norm and Chigurh’s evil will never be captured in the slogan that “he is corrupt” or a “lawbreaker.” The fact is he does not care about the law, really has no apparent antagonism toward it, and so certainly does not come across as “having a problem with authority.” He transcends this banality. In a very early scene we learn that Chigurh allows himself to be “brought in” by a deputy just because he wanted to demonstrate (at least to himself) that he could escape (the scene is quite brutal). He later calls this an act of hubris, but what is clear is that he did not “have it in” for the deputy, nor did he want the attention of the sheriffs as a “bad ass” or something similar. If anything, he crucially desires to be hidden from view (in all respects). The social corruption is the first and very broad condition of Chigurh’s existence but it only expresses an environmental condition: it does not express his essence. The social corruption explains the *gross irrelevance of the law as a crucial aspect of the environment*.

Corruption, as described in the above, does not seem to be enough in order to set down all of the environmental conditions for a Chigurh to emerge. I believe Ed Tom knows this in his very direct but also subtle way. Ed Tom comes to know things in the narrative by articulating those things to himself. At one point in the narrative, his own narrative, he says that all this horror starts with the loss of basic manners, when people stop saying “please,” “thank you,” “sir” and ma’am.” While this may seem corny or even idiotically nostalgic, it captures a fundamental point in how persons develop and sustain themselves. Basic recognition of the other person, for the sake of that recognition, and for the sake of the respect for that recognition, are the beginning of what I call “intersubjectivity” or the most basic recognition of our dependence on one another. Human language and conversation are the core of intersubjectivity as they very nearly define human beings and also create the possibility of human agency and identity. *The manner in which we speak to one another can either open possibilities for the recognition of intersubjectivity or it can erode them*. Chigurh’s utterances, his “conversation,” are never a recognition of the value of conversation and they are never meant as an opening to the other person. At the same time, his utterances are not “hostile” or “angry” which might betray the possibility of reconciliation or it might just type him as the psychopath. Chigurh does not appear to be “hiding anything” in his complete disinterest in what Ed Tom calls “manners.”

Now we have to face my ecological principles for the first time. I think we defeat the possibility of understanding Chigurh’s evil (insofar as will be able to describe it as evil) by taking a defensive position. Ed Tom sometimes begins to go there in places but he always goes back to the position that a history predicted this walking dread. To specifically face the principles in this case is to ask: what aspects of the environment, the entire environment (however we want to specify that precisely) could generate-in an individual-a form of communication that *entirely closes the recognition of the value of any conversation so that he is entirely self-referential*? And then he has to be entirely self-referential in a strange way because self-reference as egoism is always in play with the recognition of others: this is how it is recognized by anyone as self-reference and this is one reason why Chigurh is opaque. One answer concerns the bloody mayhem at the beginning of the

narrative; whatever else this is, it is clearly the complete breakdown of a “negotiation”. We all know the shopworn cliché that the community of criminals is an impossibility (the view seems to originate with Plato) but it may be possible that hastening the disintegration of the “criminal community” by a criminal, and on purpose, would feed into even the empirical impossibility of a criminal community. In this case, the criminal might become necessarily singular, isolated and from the complete denial of intersubjectivity. At the very least it is important to note that the narrative really starts with an episode of Chigurh’s brutality without apparent malice (malice opens up a relationship, as does the desire to inflict pain) and this episode is immediately followed by the mayhem in the scrub. From here on in, *one person, Anton Chigurh, is going to handle all negotiation*. The point is, of course, that “negotiation” has transitioned out of intersubjectivity as it relates to authentic human conversation (even if that conversation is threatening or malicious - which presupposes emotive connections and basic relations to others). Chigurh is what we should expect from out of the radically failed “negotiation”: an agent who can “succeed” at tasks that seem to involve human relations without the *burden* of anything like human relations.

Chigurh’s capacities are, however, still more distinct and subtle. He is not the “solipsistic” individual who believes, in some fashion, that he is the only person with an authentic mental life (a variation on a pathology). He is not some accelerated narcissist with a “grandiosity” complex: these forms are certainly not advances or evolutions of evil. In fact, they ultimately debilitate competent action. Chigurh demonstrates a recognition of the reality of others and a clear understanding of their thinking: this is how he consistently gains advantage. He seems to acquire these capacities or just have them by being “outside of everything.” He seems to have a place to stand that breaks any authentic relation to others, while at the same time knowing what they are doing and thinking. Such an epistemic position is a necessary condition for “control” which I will explain later in the essay.

Now, I believe, we should revisit the concept and existential reality of “corruption.” No doubt, corruption is a necessary element of any human society -given the nature and limitation of human beings -and it helps to sort out the specific and general grounds of right action: this is not due merely to “contrast” but also to dialectic. Insofar as a society handles and overcomes corruption it is decent or moral. Individuals become corrupt as they deny and reject *standards of intersubjectivity* (our overt dependence on each other articulated in words, actions, rules, memory and history- all of which spell out the human attempt at cooperation for well-being). Once the individual denies or rejects these standards he or she conceals that denial or rejection for some kind of self-referential gain. Corruption is then dependent on intersubjectivity as those who are corrupt or in the interesting process of “being corrupted” are always striving to conceal their rejection or denial of intersubjectivity. We should be naturally curious about whether or not there is something that is more generally worse than corruption, and the answer to that question will have to consist in some attempt to transcend corruption. Any grand scale corruption necessarily contains “control” and any grand scale control necessarily contains corruption. An ultimate control would then consist of agency that seeks and gains control over others (and say, more generally, “human reality”) without the corresponding self-seeking vacuum (gross “neediness”) that opens the doors to moral condemnation. Such a person is endeavoring to cancel human limitations by cancelling intersubjectivity. And we can describe the process from the other direction as well: by endeavoring to escape moral condemnation and so human limitations, the agent in question is closing in on an ultimate control. Of course, “ultimate control” is getting close to just cancelling the humanity of the agent in question, but the point is that such an endeavor has to fail.

Now to mention intersubjectivity and give it some bare bones is not enough. At the same time, this concept is a pivot for what follows and so we need to close in on it without having it consume the essay. Intersubjectivity

starts with a dispositional recognition of human interdependence and so human individual limitations: we might just state this in Aristotle's dictum that we are "social beings." But we need to push much harder. Human identity, being an individual in any authentic sense, is a whole process that necessarily includes others and a thick web of normative relations (a social world). The underlying and essential reason for this claim is that meaning is the only thing that can create and hold together memory (individual and collective) and so identity through time and, as Wittgenstein has argued, meaning is necessarily communal. Hence, the idea is that we cannot get human identity without meaning and we cannot get meaning apart from a communal, public process (that both creates and presupposes cooperation). *Much of human evil somehow refers back to a rejection of this idea and the reality of a public meaning.*

Unfortunately, I can't do the hard part: I can't offer a simple, direct, hypothesis regarding how our culture has rejected intersubjectivity in such a way as to create Chigurh. I can't do it anymore than anyone else can or could because how the stew mixes is not up to any of us to *finally* say. But if there is anything obvious about this culture it is the relentless emphasis on radical individualism or "atomistic individualism": the ultimate piece of human reality is the fully enclosed and autonomous individual. We can trace the DNA of this idea back to some of the greatest efforts of the western intellectual tradition. For instance, and only for instance, Kant tried to free human beings from the crushing weight of religious and political authority with the idea of the human being as fully autonomous and self-regulating moral agent. This bit of supernaturalism attaches to Kant's division of worlds or aspects of the world into "noumenal" and "phenomenal," and this is an endeavor to reach beyond our clear limits. Of course, because we are human beings, and because we always in some ways see beneath the shabby myths (as they pass from dignified philosophical ideals into things like "the economy"), evil emerges as we endeavor to protect these myths. Chigurh could very well be the human being who transcends the myths rather than hiding behind them: he is, in other words, a new form of consciousness.

III: Chigurh in Detail

Carson Wells, another "hitman" with a plausibly murky background (dark sides of the military) makes two comments that set every agenda for comprehending Chigurh. First, he mentions, right before Chigurh shoots him in the face, that he - [Chigurh] - thinks he is "outside of everything". (177) Secondly, he [Wells] is asked by his employer (who remains nameless) what he knows about Chigurh and his answer is, a "psychopath" but then he also says to Moss "you could even say he has principles." (153) Both of these dark sayings address Chigurh's radical disconnectedness and his entire rejection of intersubjectivity.

That Chigurh thinks he is "outside of everything" is hardly subtle even if Wells does not really understand what he is saying. But we do not know the depth of this statement. It can easily be lost as a slogan for some of the above ideas. Chigurh must finally be given motives, desires, and some actual goals or he *will fail all imaginative limits and become something like a pure abstraction: in other words, something profoundly unreal and uninteresting*. His goal is success at his task, his principles consistently aid in that success, and the task and the success are finally a total and complete control (he says to his "boss": "I'm in charge of who is coming and who is not." (251). A radical disconnectedness in the form of a rejection of intersubjectivity is analytic to control. To stand outside of anything is a necessary condition for the ability to completely control it. Human beings are best capable of controlling mechanical items: we stand outside of them while comprehending them. We are most able at controlling other people as we understand them (including "values") but have no interest *in them* (apart from what they can get us). All this makes sense as an explanatory hypothesis insofar as

it always becomes increasingly more difficult to separate out the “profit making motive” from “control” (of various people and processes) as profit making becomes –seemingly – an end in itself. Marx’s point about the “means of production” becomes starkly psychological. Chigurh has absolutely no interest in money – part of his principles and part of what makes him stand apart – but then he can use and manipulate that need in others for control over them. In this sense he is “a man of principle.” Wells learns this the hard way (an understatement) as he tries to bribe Chigurh with a chunk of change right before Chigurh shoots him in the face. The criminal we all know and love probably would have taken Wells’ money and then shot him in the face, all the while lying about what he is doing and intending: not Chigurh.

Chigurh, in his deep disconnection to intersubjectivity, *gives himself principles*. This scenario is Hegel’s nightmare criticism of the Kantian notion that all human beings give the moral law to themselves from the faculty of practical reason. What if, however, there is no such independent faculty, no objective dictates of conscience to bring to bear? If this is the case, then acting on principle, or even “having integrity” could easily be starkly evil. Hegel, of course, sees morality as a cultural and anthropological process; his moral psychology is essentially developmental and communal. Chigurh is the Kantian without the moral law grounding any principles. But his principles, if they are really principles, cannot be “his alone” or else even he would not understand them; he has to be able to at least explain them to other people and, if he cared to, he could. These principles quickly and smoothly tie up any loose ends, eradicate connections, and place him entirely in control. His principles always serve the telos of control. Such an integrity organizes the ecology, gives it a procedural content, makes the agent competent, all of which are greatly admired in our *culture of success*.

Kant’s own version of “radical evil” – a philosophically and culturally influential and powerful view of evil – drops out of the picture here as irrelevant. On Kant’s view (which has been popularized) evil consists in knowing what is right and neglecting our duty to do what is right in favor of selfish motives. This view of evil has been discussed and analyzed in many current texts. It drops out of the picture here as irrelevant because Chigurh does not seem to recognize anything resembling a “moral law” and because he is not selfish in any standard sort of way. One might also say, with complete certainty, that Chigurh does not know any internal struggle with himself over duty. On Kant’s view of things, Chigurh is not an agent at all; he would be outside of morality, and so outside of moral success and failure, and so outside the realm of intersubjectivity. And this is, of course, the point. To be “outside of everything” is also to be outside the reach of any standard type moral claim and, more importantly, outside of the internal and external struggles with ourselves and other people that make any broader spiritual qualities possible (joy, longing, redemption, love, friendship).

To follow through on the Kantian line concerning “radical evil” is to consider Chigurh as radically diminished as a “moral agent.” This is indeed the case, but the issue becomes difficult at this point for the very simple reason that we might not want to assume anything about what sort of world we actually inhabit: in other words, assuming the cultural norm as moral agency in the Kantian sense is, perhaps, a gross mistake. There is already enough of “a-morality” within the culture to think, reasonably, that thoroughly “a-moral” human beings are an alternative “norm.” A final response to the Kantian is that Chigurh is acting out a “success ethic” buried deep in American consciousness; he is reliable and incredibly efficient and ingenious on the job, and that is all he is ever doing: the job (he says to “his boss”: “I’d say the purpose of my visit is simply to establish my bonafides. As someone who is an expert in a difficult field. As someone who is completely reliable and completely honest. Something like that.” (252)) Last, but certainly not least, he aims to be at the very top of the job and alone at the top (“I have no enemies. I don’t permit such a thing” 253). I would therefore suggest alternatives to the Kantian picture from the ground up: to be diminished in moral agency might just be a human norm-within limits and a diversity of types-and so we lose the world that Kant

presupposed for anything like his “radical evil”. From this point of view, “radical evil” loses the basis of its existence.

From a similar direction comes the claim - already mentioned in passing - that Chigurh is a “psychopath.” We can say a lot about this so we better limit ourselves to what seems core to the issue. The amount of nonsense in popular culture about psychopathology is very nearly enough to strip our empirical and conceptual gears before we even start. If we consult empirical and clinical psychology we do see that Chigurh certainly has no “conscience” as he shoots people in the face and this is consistent with a psychopathology. But once again, we have to assume the norm as “having a conscience” and I am not sure we can do this within McCarthy’s ecology. It might be more mentally deranged to have a conscience in the world Chigurh travels and works within: at the very least, “having a conscience” would be directly self-defeating in any number of ways. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, Chigurh does not simply self-enclose like the psychopath who follows rules only if they are consistent with his wants and desires. Oddly, Chigurh seems capable of completely avoiding anything like self-gratification. He will, in fact, follow his rules whatever the apparent consequences (although his rules are designed for maximum efficiency). And finally, as a way of addressing the popularized version of the psychopath, Chigurh seems to take absolutely no enjoyment from performing “evil acts” for their own sake. I believe, as he commits these acts, he is already in the midst of seeing beyond them to the next procedural step in his plan. But again consider the ecology we are *-in fact -* dealing with: what decisions and how many decisions are made in our culture, or perhaps any truly human world, from a purely “a moral” standpoint? I mean, in other words, human beings act with no tug of “conscience” or even interest in “moral issues” in the face of the business that must be handled. I suggest that this culture is saturated with the basic form of Chigurh’s a-morality. Kant’s “moral law within” simply does not exist and the corresponding psychology is empty of any struggle with moral duty. Of course, we then must also cancel out all the rest of the baggage: standard forms of praise and blame, freedom of the will (to choose “good “ over “evil” and so forth). This is what Ed Tom sees coming down the pike.

This “a-morality” comes to the forefront before Chigurh kills Carson Wells. Chigurh expresses, without any doubt, a sort of professional disdain for Wells and, at the same time, his horribly violent act is committed without even an appearance of malice. (“It’s not good Carson. You need to compose yourself. If you don’t respect me what must you think of yourself? Look at where you are.” (177)) Wells, for his part, may very well be kidding himself in believing that Chigurh is crazy; they are, after all, competitors of sorts, and Wells knows the stakes (through plenty of experience). McCarthy also directly states that there is plenty of a-morality in Wells’ own sordid and violent past. In fact, one might say from this perspective that Wells is pathetic in hoping for a successful bribe: money is not “the job” and as Wells thinks it is, he still believes in and lives within a moral world. In other words, he makes use of “temptation” and “greed” within his bribe. But all that comes back is an echo because Chigurh has moved beyond that world, out into a sheer a-morality (Chigurh to Wells: “You think I’m like you. That it’s just greed. But I’m not like you.” (177)) Wells appeals back to the moral world only because his life is at stake otherwise he too would continue to function in a more or less “a-moral” way. If anyone knows this it would be Wells. Years of experience in the military during Vietnam must end in a healthy dose of a-morality or *else nothing would ever get done*. (He saw “the faces of men as they died on their knees in front of him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country.” (178))

Schopenhauer, when he came face to face with the Kantian picture of radical evil, discovered and invented another source of evil: “inner torment”. Inner torment is not captured in the struggle with “moral duty” but in the innate madness of our own ceaseless desire and willing. Chigurh, in moving into an a-morality, has an adjusted psychology that seems also entirely resilient to Schopenhauer’s specific form of inner torment and

then any other form of inner torment. “He knows exactly what he wants” but he does not indulge desire enough to be tormented. This, one could say, is a miracle of human evolution, but given the ecology one could also say that it bottoms out in necessity. Chigurh has no “divided self” which seems to be a constant element of the human condition: we both desire something and reject it at the same time. None of this haunts Chigurh. As long as any person “has no business” with him, Chigurh has no working desire to harm or inflict pain from some sort of psychic disturbance (built in or otherwise). Although, we have to examine the “coin-flipping” scene in some detail before we can say for sure that this is the case.

Peter Dews in a recent and philosophically rich book on the problem of evil argues that we can have no “theory of evil” unless we also have responsibility and ownership for that evil. What he is really trying to say is that bad acts without someone being responsible for those acts are not, properly speaking, evil (intent is analytic to evil). If what I have argued in the above is even partly true then we have a new set of problems. If Chigurh is “missing a morality chip,” if he has literally evolved into a complete “a- morality” he can hardly be held “morally responsible” for his acts: this would be a flat out contradiction. Of course, we could argue that he should feel a moral pull but this is complicated by his environment or what I have been calling his ecology. Morality - and a base level intersubjectivity - become a hindrance for efficient functioning within this environment. But, and this is the crucial piece of it, I see no adequate reason for concluding that Chigurh is then not evil. What has to happen is that we have to condemn the world and the entire ecology, instead of some individual. “Horribly violent acts” done by human beings against other human beings that are not even recognized as “evil” by the agent seem to me to be better candidates for evil than whatever remains tied to responsibility. We don’t own the evil in one sense (namely, Chigurh is missing the morality chip) but we are perhaps deeply implicated in the formation of an a-moral world that created Chigurh. What greater nightmare than facing an evil (a-moral) *world or ecology rather than evil individuals?*

IV: Friendo: More Detail

This scene is not only horrifying it seems nearly beyond belief. It also raises issues we have not yet seen.

To begin with, Chigurh reveals, as he does with Carson Wells, some sense of his inner life. He comments, as he considers the owner, “cracker” (54) and this immediately raises the idea of disdain; he also comments - in a disturbing and inconceivably threatening way - that the man behind the counter “married into” (55) the store (gas station). In other words, he did not attain it on his own. Chigurh’s clear disdain for this state of affairs echoes what I have already said concerning his “success ethic.” Chigurh literally peels away the layers of idiocy from the man by simply denying any room for manners or small talk. He is not just refusing to cut the store owner any slack, he is bearing down on the nature of his existence and, as he does, the man becomes increasingly more uncertain about himself and increasingly more certain that Chigurh is inherently dangerous. His linguistic engagement with the man is an “interrogation” without any context for an interrogation: it ends as ontological condemnation of the man’s existence.

It may very well be the case that Chigurh’s radical a-morality threatens in its mere presence. This man must be wondering, thinking, as he stumbles for any kind of response to the totally certain Chigurh (regarding the “value” of the man’s existence): “what the hell is this?” A drunken man with a gun is certainly less menacing and would entirely lack Chigurh’s other worldly and ominous stare (that we can only imagine). It is as if some new and strange version of the grim reaper just walked into the store. But Ed Tom is right, and we need to remember this, “manners” and even “small talk” are recognitions of intersubjectivity: the source of Chigurh’s

terrifying presence is that he signals, immediately, the end of that recognition. He is not exactly rude, belligerent, or any other way that at the same time depends on intersubjectivity. He literally does not know what manners are, what small talk would really be (for him) and so it amounts to sheer stupidity or incoherence from *his point of view*. At the same time, Chigurh has remarkable insights into “other minds”; he is no solipsist, narcissist, or as I already argued “lunatic.” In this context, Chigurh is able to bury the onset of manners under glaring and penetrating a-morality. In what sense is this man behind the counter useful, industrious, and competent, seem to matter to Chigurh but not in any moral sense. He is once again “standing outside of everything.”

Now, one might claim, with some plausibility I suppose, that Chigurh is “tormenting” the man. But there does not seem to be any enjoyment in this for Chigurh that might explain the purpose of the torment; instead, the man seems to dissolve into a state of terror from Chigurh’s very simple and direct fact finding. What makes him so menacing is a sense that there is no “tolerance” of any sort underneath the fact finding that might be found in someone who is ordinarily rude: at some point the rudeness just goes away, literally drives away. But Chigurh is more like a state of affairs, more like a whole ecology of a distinct sort, settling on the man’s existence and weighing it in relation to the nature of that ecology. The conclusion is not a good one for the man behind the counter.

The coin-flip has to reveal a lack of malice. Disdain, followed by malice, with an already proven homicidal tendency just spells a bullet into the face and not some strange ritual. What we know is that Chigurh will not challenge the coin flip, he won’t shoot the man if “he wins” and, of course, this is what happens: at which point, Chigurh does not indicate the slightest bit of disappointment. Given what I have said about Chigurh’s endeavor for control, this ritual seems contradictory: it invites chance and a lack of control. The answer to this riddle is in the nature of control. First, and foremost, Chigurh has entirely disintegrated the man’s sense of himself just by being Chigurh; standing outside of the man’s world in this way - this essentially a-moral, but success oriented way - is enough to ground a complete control of the situation. Imagine then being able to *believe oneself to be an agent of fate, which is what Chigurh is up to*. An agent of fate now flips the coin and in that act - in pressing that act from the moment he walked into the store - Chigurh has already entirely controlled the man. Allowing the coin toss to determine the outcome is, of course, a voluntary act even as Chigurh binds himself to the outcome. In other words, it is *Chigurh who is allowing the contingency to occur, he is the one allowing for chance; this is the transcendence of what we would ordinarily consider to be human control, which is the attempt - however haphazard - to manage chance and contingency*.

And it gets better. There is an astonishing, close to inconceivable “self-control” exhibited here by Chigurh: like a great Kantian he has “bound himself” to the rule of the coin toss. He has bound himself to a sheer contingency. Whether or not he “wants” to kill the man is not really the point; it is more important that he very easily could kill the man as long as the coin toss *goes the other way*. Not knowing “what he wants” (in some emotive way) is part of how Chigurh constantly keeps others off guard and uncertain of themselves; his emotive opacity shakes others into revealing and then disintegrating into their own emotions (and uncertainties). This is certainly what happens to Carson Wells right before he dies and it is certainly what is happening to the man behind the counter.

Consider also what happens if Chigurh changes the form of the procedure: imagine, in other words, him asking a question and if the man answers “the right way” he lives and if he answers “the wrong way” he dies. In this case Chigurh would be imposing his agency on the result whereas the coin toss removes his agency from the result and then transforms it into sheer necessity (as the result does not “depend” on anyone and the

coin will be heads or tails according to a causal determinism). The process of “externalizing” the event - which more closely resembles the idiotic notion of “fate” - is symmetrical to the way Chigurh conflates himself with “the job.” He becomes, more or less (it does not matter so much because he is on categorical boundaries) a tool or sort of radically efficient machine for end results that eliminate the standard “wants and needs” of the criminal. But the main point here is that in making use of the coin toss, Chigurh “*reinforces necessity*” by *taking human agency out of the picture*. Of course, the irony being that control is his ultimate purpose and any sort of full interpretation of the “friendo” scene has to acknowledge the manner in which Chigurh *forces the circumstance on the man and also reduces the man to a radical state of ontological dread*. Literally, the man only knows that something wicked has entered his store and that it has cut down to the roots of his being in a matter of minutes. Chigurh does this by approaching the state of “being outside of everything.” I have analyzed or explained “standing outside of everything” as “cutting all ties with intersubjectivity” but it is also consistent with achieving a God-like status: on any religious view such an attempt is a radical evil. But the other possibility is - in my view - more interesting; the God-like point of view is *inherently wicked because there is no reality standing over and above us*. The reality that we have to truly worry about is the one that we live within and the one that constantly presents us with puzzles and contingencies: the natural world. In suggesting an entity that could cut ties with other things without any consequence to itself (without altering its nature) is itself wicked or evil in that it grossly distorts the nature of human existence.

What happens next is that the scene ends. We should, however, imagine what this scene actually depends on or what makes it possible. For this we only have the threads of an argument and the ineffable combination of words and events (the sheer limits of understanding). I think for Chigurh to make this “impression” and to create the doom described in the above, he must first be a stranger. We should note carefully that Chigurh does not want anyone to know what he looks like: this counts as a loose end on the surface of things. Being faceless serves an unsettling purpose (Wells does know what he looks like and he has to die just for this fact). What exists outside of everything has no appearance. Now, what McCarthy has really done here is quite spooky. He has created a character that we cannot imagine as having a history. Importantly, McCarthy gives us absolutely no background information on Chigurh, while he does for everyone else in the narrative. Again, this is a trump card on human existence and consciousness for Chigurh. And this is precisely what the “friend - scene” depends on. If the man behind the counter even “types him” Chigurh loses the other-worldly, outside of everything status that courts doom at every turn for anyone in his presence. But not having a history is also not to have a memory and here we come face to face with a truly remarkable question: what, precisely, can Chigurh “remember” and how does he remember it?

Why this question about memory? Well, first and foremost, it is demanded by the apparent or weird sense that Chigurh has no history, which is further grounded in the apparent fact that he cannot be “typed” (he stands outside of everything). Ultimately this is all illusion but it is an interesting human project and an interesting attempt as the ecology keeps going in a certain direction (radical individualism, corruption, as detailed in the first section). *Chigurh cannot remember what he does not have and if he has no history then he cannot remember it*. Perhaps this would make for the perfect tool for the achievement of certain ends. As we get further into this, however, I think we can see that intersubjectivity lays the ground for having a history because it analytically contains the source of meaning and value. If I can’t generate a meaning, I can’t generate a value of any sort, but then I can’t remember anything (in a human way) because I can’t tell what is “worth remembering.” What makes Chigurh so interesting as a possibility is that he does not simply cancel himself out as an entity. He can still remember what matters for his final end—control - and this will sheer away anything that is irrelevant to that final end. I mean, what difference would it make if Chigurh never remembered anything about the man behind the counter? If this man evaporated from his consciousness

entirely, Chigurh would still have the form of control at his disposal. He does not need to recall the specific event; he only needs the technique. He can reduce consciousness to procedure. Do tigers, for instance, recall specific prey? Or do they just know how to hunt? Certainly memories accumulate for knowledge within animals, this is assured to us in empirical study and research. But it is the form of memory that matters here. For the tiger one antelope is just the same as any other (with the exception of the one with the limp) because they have no reason to individuate in any sense distinct from the activity of hunting and killing. And it may be that Chigurh has no reason to individuate in any sense distinct from the activity of controlling and succeeding at his job (which conflate). His memory, in other words, is built from a-morality. What he can't remember is the reality of relations beyond their procedural content and this limit could actually be a strong survival mechanism given certain ends.

On the other hand, to be outside of intersubjectivity also opens up the possibility of a total clarity. The emotive life, broadly speaking, necessarily depends on intersubjectivity. Hence, at the very least, Chigurh is emotively empty. His "disdain" for the man behind the counter is then a form of "pure judgment" from his principles and his disgust with Carson Wells is equally pure: a success ethic without any emotive mess to slow it down. Such a way of being in the world, insofar as it is possible, might allow for a transparently clear and detailed memory of a series of events as they are related *only to the efficiency of the procedure and the end result*. It is our emotive connection to others that consistently allows for the interpretation and reinterpretation of "memories" and so events and persons.

In the above I have compared Chigurh with a God - like point of view and, at the same time, an animal point of view. Aristotle once asked: what can live in complete solitude? And he answered, "either a beast or a God." Chigurh does live in complete solitude. Just as we cannot really imagine him as "having a history" neither can we imagine him with companions of any sort. The a-historical being precludes, in its very nature, anything even like a "friend" (hence Chigurh does not use the term "friend" but "friendo"). The notion of "friend" or even "companion" requires elements of "a history together" and this conflates with a "relationship." Our ecological points now come back in a haunting way. Perhaps the ecology has opened up space for the purely a-historical consciousness because "corruption" itself borders on a- historical terrain. Corruption, as I described it, is most generally the rejection of intersubjectivity, the rejection of relations, and this - as we see in the above -conflates with an a- historical consciousness. To truly and totally "reject" relations does presuppose an agency to do so and this then presupposes already existing relations. This sort of "rejection" is revolt. Chigurh may have gone beyond this point, this criminal point of corruption, to an actual form of consciousness - heavy with intelligence - that is truly a- historical and so will not accommodate relations. Clearly, this form of consciousness is inconceivably efficient because it does not "reject morality" but rather precludes the conditions for morality. So Chigurh has the mental power to "individuate" between persons but not for any moral purposes. He is not bothered by "what should I do?" beyond the procedural aspects of this question. How would not worry about the "meaning of his relations to others" beyond how they mattered for the job.

V: One More Coin Toss

Moss, as I briefly discussed earlier in the essay, is prone to errors just because he has a strong moral sense: he is the least capable of understanding Chigurh. He thinks he is in a competition with Chigurh, a "who is the toughest man standing" competition, and this assumes that Chigurh actually *cares about this kind of competition*. The best way to reap the benefits of a competition, whatever it might be, is to stand outside of it

and manipulate it. It suits Chigurh's purposes for Moss to want the showdown because Chigurh has nothing invested in such an event; he simply will not allow it to happen. To invest in this competition is a mistake waiting to happen as contingencies surround and infect human relations of any sort and the world is itself a dangerous place for our plans and goals.

Moss exposes his identity to Chigurh by giving into his compassionate conscience; one of the wounded Mexicans out in the scrub wanted some water but Moss had no water at the time. Moss then reveals his humanity by very probably talking internally to himself about the man with no water, suffering in the heat with a nasty wound; even though he is very probably dead, Moss helps him anyway: intersubjectivity here speaks to Moss in a physical and moral universality. Underneath the tough guy is something like a golden rule, which is nothing more than a transparent recognition of intersubjectivity.

Moss' second fatal mistake is of the same family, as one might expect. On his way down the interstate, fleeing Chigurh and drug gangs, he picks up a hitchhiking teenage girl. He befriends her in multiple ways (all with good intentions), gives her advice, discusses her future, and all for the sake of the acts themselves, the intrinsic value of human relations. He then decides to drink a few beers with her: an act that is paradigmatic of human relations. At this point he and the girl are shot dead by the drug gangs. For Chigurh, this development is as it should be. Moss was going to die as he resisted Chigurh's procedural template for reality. There is no "showdown" between the two men because the clash of wills or the importance of defending a civil society from the criminal deviant *are irrelevant from the start*. Chigurh is now the future ecology and not some deviant.

The last scenes involving Chigurh contain all my explanatory hypotheses that hinge on the idea of his being "outside of everything." Moss's wife, Carla Jean, has the profoundly dreadful experience of being caught up in Chigurh's "principles." At one point earlier in the narrative, Chigurh gives Moss the option of bringing the money "to his feet" and thus saving his wife. Moss's own death is already falling under necessity (he is gone way too far into the business). Moss, however, will never do this and so Chigurh must follow his "principles": he is making all this up, while at the same time trying to convince others of its necessity.

But he does not simply kill Carla Jean. Once more, there is a "discussion" and Chigurh actually compromises his principles to *allow for a coin flip*. Just prior to this scene Chigurh had gone to visit the nameless boss where he says "I have no enemies, I don't permit such a thing." (He has clearly impressed the boss, perhaps to the point where the boss is both afraid of and uncertain about what he is dealing with.) One might say again that "being outside of everything" is the platform for control and Chigurh now seems on the verge of simply conflating himself and his will to reality. He will not simply handle the task but whatever contingencies that arise from the completion of the task (such as an enemy). This sense of self, insofar as it is any "sense of self," transcends the pettiness inherent to selfishness.

A person who could achieve this level of self-control and then control of others (these two conflate as well) while who at the same time lacks the pettiness of selfishness is exactly the man business needs. The worry for the boss is, naturally enough, that Chigurh's fact finding in the pursuit of perfection at the task will lead back to his (the boss's) own incompetence ("I think what you need to consider, Chigurh said, is how you lost the money in the first place. Who you listened to and what happened when you did." (252)) What we really need now is corruption and lawlessness- the rejection of intersubjectivity - without the endless mess. Chigurh, with his apparently all encompassing abilities to complete these tasks (according to his principles, a truly "independent operator") provides the final edge to corruption: it won't have to conceal itself because Chigurh

has already concealed it (from the boss's point of view). Or, even better, Chigurh could convince all of us that what we call corruption is just a series of necessities. In other words, *his task is to wipe out the consciousness of intersubjectivity*.

And then Chigurh, in his "discussion" with Carla Jean, becomes a metaphysical salesman; even as he is deadly serious (convinced of his product), from a certain distance - without the dread - his sayings and slogans are idiotic. (It would not take much for other characters to generate a cascade of mockery, this is how close he is to the edges of reality). When Chigurh allows for a coin flip and Carla Jean loses, she says "you make it like it was the coin, but you're the one." (258)) Chigurh then goes back to his nonsense, "I got here the same way the coin did" and some other standard and pathetic lines of reasoning for something like "fatalism." (258)) Finally, he does what he did with "friendo": he removes his own agency, via the coin flip reasoning and the shabby fatalism (for someone without the brutal menace "everything happens for a reason" would be seen as stupid or ridiculous). What is happening here is what we should have seen all along: the concealment of radical corruption as it is taken up into the nature of things. The point is never to flinch, never to conflate necessity with an excuse or a justification.

If we let Chigurh spin his tale of control and necessity on Carla Jean - as readers and participants in human reality - we become a-moral ourselves. She is precisely the innocent victim in all the right ways for this corruption to work itself out into an open space. Poor, essentially good-hearted (instinctively moral), now alone, widowed and having just buried her mother, Chigurh shoots her from "necessity!?" Carla Jean has witnessed nothing but in a vague and profound way she has always been involved. The burden of Chigurh (for all of us) ends up resting on her. Symmetrically, the burden of all corruption comes to rest on those without any power and control. Here is where the corruption finally ends this causal strand in its ongoing history: *the death of a person who never really knew what was happening as everything led to her death*. Such a circumstance should not elicit pity but virulent anger for the simple and clear reason that all this was anything but "necessary." A confusion between *the predictable results of corruption (within obvious limits)* and *metaphysical necessity is hardly worth discussion*. But Chigurh sells it and he does so from the standpoint of control that is really gained through menace and force.

And so Carson Wells is right, Chigurh is not "outside of everything" because he is not "outside of death" (and then everything else just follows). As his last piece in the narrative perfectly illuminates: he is not outside the most obvious and subtle of all contingencies. It is not "morality" that catches up with Chigurh but the world, and it is the world that takes us back to the very most basic levels of intersubjectivity: human need. Chigurh's car is T-boned by a truck a few minutes after his "act of necessity" and what could possibly explain the meaning of these series of events? The only covering hypothesis is the one I just discussed. Chigurh is ultimately subject to the most brute and obvious contingencies: everything that comes from the natural world and our own, always underestimated, limits. The full awareness of our strict physical limits is already enough to create the threads of intersubjectivity. After this nasty crash Chigurh is helped by two boys who don't want his money. I'm sure McCarthy was aware of the cliché he manages to give life: one kid gives Chigurh "the shirt off his back." He needed the shirt to deal with the compound fracture of his arm, which is just another example of our profound limits in dealing with the world. Our normative evolution only takes place as the limits and needs are recognized, assimilated, and the bonds of intersubjectivity established (as is the case with any biological organism).

And yet a bold and forever fascinating individualism works to conceal the contingencies of our actual existence. Chigurh can evolve *from the capacity of consciousness to avoid reality*. Corruption is then written into

the nature of human agency as a routine and necessary part of reality. But this is more than lying to ourselves because the lie works itself out in the struggle over money, power, and finally control. Even if Chigurh contains his own self-destruction in his belief that he stands outside of everything, there is no prima-facie reason for thinking that human beings will ultimately face up to this delusional state. Instead we may see the shiny allure of the power and control and thereby hasten the decline of (any) culture.

Finally then, evil is the human endeavor to conceal corruption and write it into the nature of agency and reality. This view of evil is strangely related to a familiar religious and philosophical view that human beings are, in fact, “sinners” or are made from “crooked timber.” Kant’s crooked timber includes, I’m afraid, the ability to conceal the crookedness from ourselves, to accept corruption as necessary, and then just to cancel out corruption. Evil is business as usual.

Sources

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