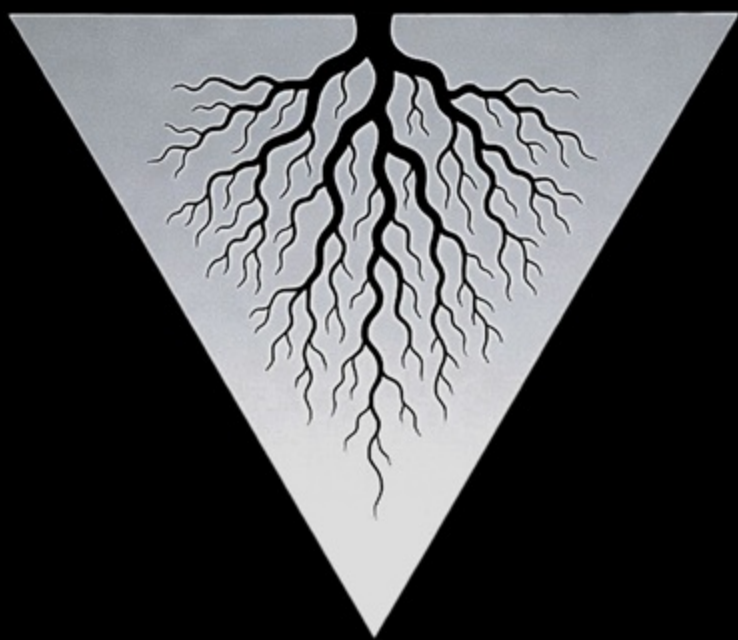


DENYS SPIRIN

ETHICS OF  
THE ABYSS



# Ethics of the Abyss

**Philosophy of the Left-Hand Path, Volume 3**

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# Preface

This is the third book in a series that began with *Against the Light* and continued with *The Black Flame*.

*Against the Light* settled the epistemological ground. Any ontology rests on a postulate that cannot be derived from anything more fundamental. The choice between ontologies is between axioms; there is no neutral position. The philosophy of the Left-Hand Path begins here: if every picture of reality is sustained by will, then the sovereign subject is the one who refuses to delegate his will to any external authority.

*The Black Flame* addressed the metaphysics. Will, as the act that posits, is acausal: it does not follow from prior conditions and cannot be predicted from within the causal order. The world as we know it is a project of causality, a regime of rules, regularities, and deterministic chains. The Black Flame is the name for the capacity to stand outside that regime and recognize it as such.

Ethics was present in both books but never at the center. Here I trace the path from ontology to amorality: a position that is outside the jurisdiction of both morality and immorality. The subject who has ceased to delegate his will still lives among others, acts, and causes consequences. What governs those acts when no code applies is the problem I address.

# Chapter 1

A soldier kills an enemy. The patriot will say: good, he defended his country. The Christian pacifist calls it evil: "Thou shalt not kill." Both are certain their judgment is absolute; they deliver it with complete conviction. Where does this assurance come from?

From the fact of the killing. The patriot evaluated it through the lens of duty to the nation, the Christian — on the basis of the commandment. Two different conclusions are drawn from the same fact.

We're already wrong, though. Both judgments preceded the fact. The patriot knew that defending the homeland was good long before this particular soldier pulled the trigger. The Christian believed that killing was evil from the moment he accepted the commandment. The fact just activated a ready-made judgment.

This judgment follows from a picture of the world, which comes from an ontology, from how reality is structured inside the head of the one who judges. The patriot inhabits a world where the nation is the supreme value, and its defense outweighs the life of a particular human being. For the Christian, it is God who issued a norm, and its violation outweighs any earthly consideration. These are two different worlds and the moral verdict is a consequence of architecture, not an independent act of reason.

"Killing is evil" looks like a statement capable of standing without metaphysics, a self-evident truth requiring nothing more than basic human feeling. Now add an ontological frame. Suppose the victim is a righteous man and an afterlife exists. The killing sent him to paradise for eternal bliss. Thirty years of earthly existence exchanged for infinity of joy. Is this evil? Finite suffering traded for infinite good, a favorable deal. Yet nearly everyone who hears this argument will feel uncomfortable.

Now a different frame. For a materialist the victim simply ceased to exist. Would the remainder of his life have been happy? Unknown. Would it have contained more suffering than joy? Unknown. Would it have benefited others? Nobody knows. Without any details about what the remaining life would have

been, the claim "life interruption is evil" hangs in the air. The materialist is forced to lean on additional assumptions: life is inherently valuable and suffering is undesirable. These assumptions are postulates. Together they constitute the hidden ontology of his ethics, so familiar it is perceived as the absence of ontology.

The circle closes. Religious ethics rests on religious metaphysics; secular ethics rests on secular philosophy. Each obscures its underlying principles: the former through the claim of divine revelation, the latter with the guise of "self-evidence" and "common sense." Ethics without an ontology beneath it is a fiction. It usually hides its ontology so effectively that it becomes invisible.

To say that the ontology is hidden does not mean that its dogma is concealed. The Nicene Creed is not a secret document; a materialist philosophy textbook is available to anyone. The hiddenness is in the subject. A person who insists that life is sacred may have no idea that this conviction follows from an ontology at all — he has never traced the connection between his moral judgment and the worldview that produces it. A theologian or a committed materialist sees his ontology, can articulate it, and still does not recognize it as a postulate. For him, it is a *description* of what is the case; the ontology's postulatory character remains undetectable.

Both cases of hidden ontology are products of the same mechanism. It was described in *The Black Flame* under the name of *ontologization*. Any concept accepted as a starting point can exist in two modes. In the first, the subject holds it consciously: he knows he is assuming something and that the axiom could in principle be otherwise. In the second, the postulate has been absorbed so thoroughly that it no longer registers as an assumption at all. It has fused with the subject's perception of the world. It *is* reality. Ontologization is the process by which a postulate transitions from the first mode to the second. What was once a choice or an imposition hardens into an undeniable fact. The idea no longer appears as *a* way of seeing the world; it is presented as *the* world.

The idea has crossed the threshold beyond which it is no longer examined, while the criteria for what counts as a valid question are themselves products of the same ontology. And this makes the history of ethics legible in a new way.

An ethical system can be read as an attempt to install a particular picture of reality so deep that the morality growing from it appears self-evident and universal. The first thinker to perform this move with full philosophical self-awareness was Plato.

In *Euthyphro*, Socrates poses a question: is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious or is it pious because the gods love it? If the first, then the gods are subordinate to a moral law that exists independently of them. If the second, morality is arbitrary: the pious is whatever pleases the gods, and were the opposite to please them, it would be equally pious. Euthyphro, predictably, got tangled. Plato offered a way out: the idea of the Good as a transcendent source, independent of both gods and human caprice.

This solution became the template for two millennia of Western ethics. Christianity replaced Plato's Good with God but kept the concept: there exists a supreme source of morality, accessible through revelation. Kant substituted God with the authority of pure reason but again the premise was the same.

The trouble is that Plato's solution is the pure case of ontologization. He saw that moral quality depends on ontology and responded by constructing the "correct" ontology, in which the Good has objective status. Instead of registering the dependence as a fundamental fact, he attempted to resolve it by anchoring morality in a secure foundation. All subsequent systems repeated the same move. The content of the foundation changed (God, Reason, Nature, the Social Contract, the Maximization of Happiness) but the core remained: morality depends on ontology, and philosophy's task is to find the correct ontology from which the correct morality follows.

This search presupposes that among the available ontologies there is one that is a description of how things actually are. In *Against the Light* it was argued that no ontology meets this criterion. Any ontology is built on an axiom, a starting point that cannot be derived from anything more fundamental without invoking yet another starting point. The choice between ontologies is between postulates, and no procedure exists that could adjudicate the choice from a position outside. If this is granted, then the project of grounding morality always fails.

The plurality of ontologies is itself the proof of their postulatory character. If any one were demonstrable, the rest would be errors and the dispute would have been settled — the way the geocentric model of the universe was closed. It never has. Theologians and materialists coexist for millennia, each aware that the other's picture exists, each unmoved. A fact does not need to be defended; a postulate does. Paul Tillich observed that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an element within it. The observation cuts both ways: the believer who doubts knows, at some level, that his foundation is a decision, and the materialist who argues with fury against the believer betrays the same awareness.

Searching for the "right" ontology beneath morality is the same as looking for the correct illusion. Most moral disagreements are ontological conflicts disguised as value disputes. The participants think their discussion centers on what is good and evil, yet they are actually debating how reality is constituted, with moral conclusions arising naturally from this underlying divergence.

For someone who holds that the soul arises at conception, abortion is murder. For those who believe that until a certain stage the fetus is a collection of cells, abortion is a medical procedure. Both may hold the same values: life matters, and suffering should be avoided. The disagreement is ontological: does the soul exist and what is "life" in the relevant sense? The moral judgment about abortion computes itself from these initial parameters.

For people who believe in an afterlife and divine judgment, hastening death usurps God's prerogative. If someone considers consciousness a product of the brain and life a finite process, helping a terminally ill person leave without agony is an act of mercy.

The Christian, the utilitarian, and the Marxist all agree that the poor should be helped. It looks like these traditions are arriving at the same moral truth, but the agreement is accidental. The Christian helps the poor because they are children of God and charity is commanded. For the utilitarian, aiding the poor is essential as poverty embodies a concentration of suffering, and redistribution alleviates the overall burden. And the Marxist declares that poverty arises from systemic exploitation, and providing assistance is a step toward dismantling the structures that produced the poverty in the first place. They all agree until the

situation shifts. Ask whether you should help a poor man who will use the money to buy drugs and the moral consensus evaporates the moment the ontologies are forced to compute a different case.

The concealment goes deeper than the examples above suggest. In the cases of abortion and euthanasia the ontological disagreement is at least identifiable: the participants can locate the point at which their pictures of reality diverge. Often the contradiction is invisible since it is embedded in the words themselves. Two people argue about free will. One means the capacity to choose between available options; the other implies the absence of determination by prior causes. Each is arguing about a different object under an identical label. "Justice" means proportional distribution for one subject and earned desert for another. "Love" is unconditional acceptance or active correction. "Violence" extends to speech or stops at physical force. The boundary is drawn by the ontology the subject carries.

Ethics as a discipline has taken this illusion at face value. It studies moral judgments as though an independent moral faculty existed, producing evaluations regardless of one's picture of the world. Entire schools, like deontology, utilitarianism or virtue ethics, are built on the misconception that one can find the right method for producing moral verdicts if procedure is correctly calibrated.

But the algorithm works only inside an accepted ontology. Universalization of maxims requires "universality" to be a meaningful criterion (and why, exactly?). Calculation of consequences presupposes that suffering is measurable and undesirable (from where does this follow?). Each procedure is embedded in its own philosophy and valid only within it.

Not all ontologies determine morality with equal rigidity. Some yield a single output like Christianity. The commandment is its direct product, and the margin for interpretation, while real, is narrow. Other ontologies do not prescribe a morality; they constrain the space within which it can be constructed. The materialist ontology is compatible with a wide range of moral conclusions. One materialist may decide that since consciousness is a fleeting accident, life is infinitely precious and must be protected. Another may claim that since consciousness is a fleeting accident, nothing has inherent value and sentimentality about

life is self-deception. The ontology has eliminated certain options, such as divine laws or cosmic justice, but it has not selected among the remainder.

The relationship between ontology and morality, then, is not always a deduction. It is sometimes derivation (as in rigid doctrinal systems), sometimes constraint or something in between. The subject who believes that "reality is matter" still needs additional postulates to get to "therefore suffering should be minimized" which are themselves ontological commitments.

Every moral judgment is a derivative of a picture of the world. But where does the worldview itself come from?

## Chapter 2

The soldier from the previous chapter believes that defending his country is good. He knows it with certainty, the way one knows that fire burns. If asked to justify this knowledge, he will give reasons: sovereignty, freedom, the safety of his family. They are the scaffolding erected around an already standing structure. When did it appear?

Not all at once. The first layer is laid in childhood, and it consists of separate, unconnected rules. "Don't lie." "Don't hit." "Say thank you." Each rule is backed by parental authority and the emotional charge that accompanies it: warmth for compliance, coldness for deviation. The child does not acquire a moral system; he receives fragments, installed one at a time.

At this stage, these are separate rules. The child who learns that lying is bad does not possess a theory of truth-telling; he has a conditioned reflex. The prohibition on defecation in the presence of others causes no harm, no justification beyond "this is how we do things," and yet the disgust that enforces it is as intense as any moral reaction the adult will ever experience.

These are moral habits, nothing more. They work the same way any habit does. A child may develop a lifelong aversion to raisins because they looked like insects; the disgust is real, the association is accidental, and no amount of rational argument will fully dissolve it. The same principle drives moral habits. The child who was shamed for lying at age four may feel a flicker of guilt at age forty when he lies.

Moral habits can sustain a subject for a long time. A teenager may go to war because everyone around him is going and it is honored, or because his father fights and his friends enlist, while refusing would mean shame. He does not need an ontology for this. His social environment marks certain actions as admirable and others as contemptible. Peer pressure, family expectation, the warmth of belonging and the chill of exclusion — these are sufficient to produce behavior that looks like moral conviction but is, in fact, compliance. The teenager who charges a machine-gun nest is brave in the same way that a child

who eats his vegetables is obedient: the cost of deviation exceeds the price of compliance, and the calculation is performed below the threshold of awareness.

But there is a qualitative shift that separates a set of habits from what is commonly called a person with convictions, with a backbone. The shift occurs when the habits fuse into a picture of the world; when "it is honorable to fight" hardens into "the nation is the supreme value and its defense outweighs my life." Suddenly, something new has appeared. The subject no longer holds separate rules; he inhabits an ontology, a claim about how reality is formed. And from this a morality follows with the force of logical consequence. He no longer needs social pressure to fight; he would fight alone, against the consensus if necessary, because the conviction is about what is *real*. The behavior may look identical; the internal framework is different. The teenager can be shaken by a change of environment: move him to a pacifist community, and within a year his courage will feel like a strange memory. The second cannot be converted so easily.

How is the ontology installed? Through the same channels that created the habits, only sustained longer and reinforced from more directions. There is no separate mechanism, it is the accumulation of habits, examples, narratives, and emotional associations until they reach a density at which they morph into a picture.

A history textbook in which "our" side was brave and "their" side was treacherous. A war film where the hero dies for his comrades and the music swells. A grandfather's story about the front, told with a particular intonation that made courage sacred and cowardice unthinkable. A holiday parade where tanks roll past cheering crowds. None of these events announced itself as the installation of a moral program; each was presented as a description of reality: this is how things are and what matters. Taken separately, each is a narrative, a small rule about what to admire and what to despise. Taken together, over years, they compose an ontology: a world in which the nation exists as a real entity, makes real claims, and deserves sacrifice. By the time the child becomes an adult, it has been absorbed so deeply that it feels like a personal discovery rather than an institutional product. The subject sincerely says "I must defend my country" without noticing that the belief was assembled piece by piece.

A German child in 1935 and a Soviet child in the same year received such small narratives (obey the party, be brave, serve something greater than yourself). By the time they were old enough to form opinions, they held opposite ontologies and different moralities. Both considered their convictions obvious. The difference between them had nothing to do with intelligence or moral depth; it was about which institution assembled the ontology.

A child studies physics and biology in school. Each lesson is a small narrative: the world is matter that obeys laws. He watches popular science programs where complex phenomena are reduced to elegant equations. He reads a blog in which believers are presented as quaint relics, people who have not yet caught up with the evidence. From online communities he learns that "rational" is a compliment and "faith" is a diagnosis. None of this arrives as an ontological declaration; each element is modest: a fact here, a joke at the expense of the credulous there. But they accumulate and he inhabits an ontology that "reality is physical processes and nothing else," which he has never examined, and never experienced as anything apart from the obvious baseline of a thinking person.

How does a narrative look? Open a dictionary and look up the word "truth." You read something like "knowledge corresponding to objective reality." This is an ontological claim: objective reality exists, knowledge is something different and can correspond to reality or not. A pragmatist, a constructivist, and a mystic would define truth differently, but the dictionary does not present alternatives. It offers a philosophical position in a neutral and authoritative voice. A piece of the ontology has been installed in the most effective way possible: as a fact about language.

The choice of a single word already transmits a narrative. A newscast that calls an uprising "unrest" has told the viewer what happened before any facts are presented: a deviation from legitimate order. "Riots" versus "revolution," "belief" versus "superstition" — the ontology arrives with the single noun.

The institution has interests, and these interests determine what ontology they compose. The state needs units: bodies that will work, reproduce, fight, and die on schedule. Hence the habits that shape patriotism are ingrained from a young age and continuously reinforced, creating an ontology that positions the state

as the highest value, and establishes the moral framework necessary. The society demands population growth; therefore the family is sacred and reproductive deviance is stigmatized. The prohibition of incest is routinely justified by genetic risks, but this reason is secondary and instrumental; it serves society's interest in healthy new units, not some freestanding moral fact. Medieval kingdoms that practiced dynastic intermarriage for political advantage had no trouble suspending the prohibition when it suited their needs.

The channels of installation share a common feature: they bypass evaluation. Books that present one arrangement of values as natural and others as barbaric or primitive; rituals that bind the body to the conviction — kneeling, saluting, standing when the anthem plays. A powerful channel is the intonation with which adults tell children what is good and what is bad. By the time the child acquires the capacity to question, the foundational layer is already in place, and it will determine which questions are legitimate to ask.

In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault showed that institutions do not merely constrain subjects — they produce them. The prison does not just punish the lawbreaker; it produces the category of the "delinquent." The school cultivates subjects who understand obedience as self-discipline, conformity as personal choice, and norms as common sense. The institution builds the self that will then "freely" comply.

Louis Althusser illustrated this process with the term *interpellation*. A police officer calls out, "Hey, you there!" and the person turns around. In that turn, the subject is constituted. He was a body in motion; now he is a suspect, a node in the juridical circuit. Institutions call out to us constantly through law or media, and we turn around, accepting the identity offered without noticing that an offer was made. "Hey, patriot!" "Hey, consumer!" Each call installs a role that, repeated long enough, becomes an ontology.

It was named *habitus* by Pierre Bourdieu. The habitus is a set of ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting that the subject adopts through prolonged exposure to a social environment and then reproduces automatically. What Bourdieu described is the intermediate stage: the point at which habits have accumulated enough weight to function as a perceptual grid but have not yet hardened into

an explicit ontology. The habitus is what makes a working-class child "naturally" defer to authority and a bourgeois child expect that he deserves to be heard. It is what makes a soldier feel that courage is admirable without having articulated the foundations from which this follows. And the habitus reproduces the conditions of its own production. The subject shaped by a particular institution goes on to shape others in the same way. A father who was taught that real men provide will teach his son that real men provide.

The subject does not have a moral framework; he *is* a moral framework. He does not hold the conviction that the nation matters; the conviction holds him, the way a skeleton holds the body.

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