

## THE REAL QUESTION

### EVIL: PART 1

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VOICEMAIL: Hi, my name is Jordan and I'm sixteen years old and I'm very passionate about politics. Um, the Trump era and four years of Trump was [pause] awful, and probably one of the hardest times to be hopeful for my future. Um, in terms of climate change, in terms of women's rights, and all those kind of issues that were really brought to the forefront with Trump as president. I am sixteen, so I can't vote, and I felt very helpless in the 2020 election because one of the biggest things you can do to have your voice heard is vote. I remember begging my parents multiple times to leave the country because I was just folding back and peeling back those layers of how terrible this president actually was. I remember writing down and researching how I could get my immediate and extended family out of the country, leaving and never coming back because of the awful things he was doing. I think the biggest tipping point was hearing about all the things he did to women, and the things he was saying about them, which really hit close to home because I am a woman and hearing those things was awful. So, the fact that I wanted to leave the country during Trump's presidency was really real for me.

[theme music begins]

VANESSA: I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

CASPER: And I'm Casper ter Kuile.

V: And this is The Real Question.

[theme music continues, fades, ends]

C: Huge thanks to Jordan for that voicemail. I so resonate with it because, as a non-American citizen I too can't vote, but I felt so kind of trapped by the situation and it – in a really similar way. And I am so proud of you for being so passionate about politics and so active in it at such a young age. And I'm gonna be talking about exactly this question later in the episode.

V: Before we get into that big question, Casper, we wanna talk to everybody about how we are supporting this podcast. So, all of our other podcasts have ads, and ads feel icky sometimes.

C: What? [Vanessa laughs] No!

V: Sometimes they're for like products that we genuinely use and are excited about, right? Like, give me an ad for certain things and I'm like "Okay! [laughs] I'll talk about how much I love puppies! 10% off puppies! Okay!" [still laughing]

C: Of course, the reality is, and everyone knows this, that we need a certain amount of money to make this work. But we want to do it differently with The Real Question. Rather than relying on ads, we really wanna be a fully community supported show.

V: We feel like we're talking about some vulnerable things in a way that like, really makes sponsorship ickier than in other podcasts that we work on. For example like, [laughing] I'm just trying to imagine, like,

“Vanessa’s weight issues. Brought to you by this food delivery service!” Right? Like [laughs] it just feels inauthentic on a different level. Whereas we know that we live in a capitalistic world, in which we have to engage in capitalism in order to do things like pay our rent and car insurance, whatever. But there are moments where we, like, are very excited to try to move away from that, and The Real Question, because we’re starting it right now, we’re not in any contracts with anyone, we feel like it’s a place where we can at least try to do that. We can’t guarantee that we will always be able to, but it feels like a fresh start and a place where maybe we can sidestep traditional forms of capitalism in the podcasting space.

C: And of course, you know that you’re supporting us, but you’re also supporting Ariana, our executive producer and editor and co-creator, Meghan, who manages our Patreon and has oversight of all sorts of things across the whole company, Nicki who manages merch. Nick who creates all the music that we use in every episode. Molly who’s an intern with us right now and is also getting paid a fair wage. So, your Patreon support is there to lift up a whole team that makes this show possible.

V: And we know that not all of you can support us on Patreon, and we totally understand if it would financially stress you out at all to support us. We would rather you not be financially stressed and listening, than supporting us, right? Like please always take care of yourself. But we wanted to let you know about this decision that we made, and we are gonna try this model of experimenting with potentially only having patron support for this podcast through the end of 2021, and we’ll see how it goes and if it goes well, we really hope to stick to it.

C: And a huge thank you to the four hundred and eighty-one people who’ve already supported us on Patreon. This show would not have existed without you. And we are just so so grateful to each of you for getting behind this show and being part of it. So, thanks for being part of that.

V: And if you’re listening to this in 2022, it’s totally fine that this episode is brought to you by DoorDash. [Casper laughs] Thank you, DoorDash!

[short music interlude]

V: So, Casper, we’re gonna pick up on this thread that Jordan started for us. What is your real question that you are bringing to us today?

C: So, let me take you back to August of 2020. So, we’ve just had the Republican convention, the Post Office is removing mail boxes and sorting machines to kind of threaten the upcoming election. Trump is literally urging people in North Carolina to vote twice, once in person once by mail. An illegal thing to suggest. And he keeps suggesting that the whole election scheduled for November should be delayed because of the pandemic, which by the way, we’re in the midst of. And it was one of those moments, you know how sometimes in like really bad political ads you’ll see like a couple stressing at a kitchen table looking at bills or something. I remember sitting at our kitchen table, me and my husband Sean, and me putting on our like monthly marital logistics agenda, “what do we do if Trump does not leave office?” Either he refuses to hold an election, either he refutes a legally binding election in which he loses, let alone even if he wins the election. What do we do if he does not leave office? And I remember bringing, like, my own pieces of research, being like, how would we move to England? You’re married to me so we can get in for a few months, but you would need to find a job, I would need to find a British job, right, all of the intricate and complex details of leaving a life behind. The reason for which feels like it’s out of your hands. And the reason why I was asking this question is because I felt like this wasn’t just an issue of someone who I didn’t approve of being elected. It felt more than that. It felt like there was an imposition

of evil onto my life and that if I didn't withstand it in some way that I was more than part of it, that I was so wrapped up in evil that I couldn't even find my way out of it again. And I use that word evil on purpose because it didn't just feel like someone's bad intentions, or someone's mistake that wasn't caught. It felt purposeful, it felt nasty. It was the tiki torches in Charleston, it was the children in cages at the border, it was the glorifying of grabbing women inappropriately, and it felt bigger than what I understood. And just to be clear, in the past I would never have used that word, evil. It feels like this old religious word that is associated with like, the devil and hell, kind of things that to me have always seemed absurd or – or cruel, right? Like implements of – of nasty religious institutions that have oppressed me and other people that I love. But I had to reach for that word this time. Because the stakes felt so high. But I don't even really know if I knew what I meant by saying it. So, the question that I'm bringing is: What is evil?

V: Ugh. What – like, what a rich question. And I have no idea. [both laugh] And it is, it feels like a theological question, right? Because I agree with you, like, evil's absolutely a word that I spend a lot of time trying to resist and then there are times where it feels like the only word that we can use. Um, I'm wondering why you don't wanna believe in evil? Why do we do this gymnastics of saying "Oh there's probably a reason that person murdered someone else." Like, why do you feel like it's bad to say, "well that person's evil, let's move on"?

C: I thought a lot about this, and I think there's two reasons: One of them is it would make me feel silly or stupid, right? Like, it's non-rational, like, there's not a clear explanation about it, and so I think I would look foolish, or I would feel foolish in some way because I – I can't explain it. And maybe behind that reason sits the real reason why I don't like to use it, which is it makes me afraid. Because like, if it's real, and I don't understand it, then what is it doing? And where is it coming from? And what might it do to me or the people that I love? It feels like I'm unleashing a force into my life that is dangerous and frightening and I can't control it and I don't want that, so I want it to go back into its non-rational box where it doesn't exist. Right?

V: I don't know. I – I'm wondering if it's something else with you also, which is: you walk through the world assuming really good intentions in people.

C: Which is so much nicer! [Vanessa laughs] I don't wanna think about a world in which people are just conniving and like trying to hurt each other. Like, who would go outside if that's how the world was? You know?

V: And I think that it's possible that the world has taught us that things are often much more complicated than they seem. And that people who call each other evil are often wrong.

C: Right.

V: Evil has this tradition of being a – an oversimplifying scapegoat, right?

C: Totally! I mean just think about witch burning, think about –

V: Right.

C: --anti-gay hatred. Like, there's – there's so much out there, it's such an untrustworthy word, it feels dangerous even to use it because who knows what the context will be when it changes? But I – I think that's why it felt so powerful to kind of admit to myself in that conversation at the kitchen table, to be

like, “No, like, this is evil.” And it wasn’t just like, this man is evil. Or this moment has you know, some sort of evilness. But like, it felt like this whole shadow or like a cloud of evil had descended and I – I couldn’t figure out a way through it except to be like, “we have to leave.”

V: Right. I know that like, probably ten years ago you described yourself as an atheist.

C: Yeah.

V: And now you’re somebody who’s like, no, god language is interesting to me. And you like –

C: Yeah.

V: --play footsie with god language.

C: [laughs] I’m putting that in my twitter bio. [Vanessa laughs] My theology is playing footsie with god language. [both laughing]

V: I’m wondering if you’re on a similar trajectory now with evil.

C: Oh wow.

V: Where like ten years ago you would be like, no. There’s no evil. Like –

C: Yeah.

V: --bad things happen, and the world is broken, and cycles of like abuse. And now you’re like, do you know what, no, I’m playing footsie with this idea that there is evil, and I don’t understand it and it is something bigger.

C: I had never put those two things together. That is so true. Yeah, I think I would have been maybe even more callous ten years ago. I – I might have said something like, “Who am I to judge what’s right and wrong?” And – and I think I’m moving away from that a little bit. I think there is more of an – at least an exploration of what does it mean for something to – to be evil, right? Like to have just pure malice and horrible intentions.

V: So, what do you suspect evil might be? As we go into this conversation.

C: The thing I feel convicted of as we start this conversation is that it’s more than just the absence of good. Right? That’s one of the traditional definitions for what evil is. It’s just a – a lack of good. But it – I don’t believe that anymore. The suspicion I have is that it has some sort of intention of its own. Or that there is something that it wants and – and that’s the box I’m afraid to open, and I guess –

V: Yeah.

C: -- that’s what I’m hoping you’ll help me open in this conversation.

V: Yeah.

C: Is like, what’s in that box? Cuz I don’t know.

V: No, I find it too that you know, I’m an atheist who’s not even playing footsie with god language. And sometimes when I talk about evil, the words I have to grasp for are religious, or like original sin. Or—

C: Hmm.

V: Like they're something just like, existentially broken. Right?

C: Hmm.

V: And, yeah, there's some sort of smoke that we like can't quite contain. So –

C: Hmm.

V: I understand that. And that it's really scary to [pause] imagine what it means.

C: Yeah.

V: Is there anything else that you feel like I should know about your thoughts about evil before we jump into these texts?

C: I guess the thing I don't wanna arrive at [laughs]

V: Yeah.

C: And like, this is just an assumption that I have, or a prejudice, I don't know. But like, I don't wanna arrive at some sort of like, goateed man with hooves that lives in a red world, you know, with horns who's like directing evil things. Like, no. Obviously I'm not gonna arrive there. So, I'm really resisting a kind of personalization of evil, cuz that – that just does not make sense to me. And yet, at the same time, this kind of cloudless nothing is now also insufficient. So, I'm like, it's between the formless and the totally formed -- is where I'm kind of thinking it's gonna land.

V: Okay! So Casper, what texts did you bring for us today?

C: So the first text that I'm bringing today is a letter by Hannah Arendt, who was twentieth century philosopher. And in particular I wanna bring you a letter that she brought in response to a – a kind of a critique or a set of questions offered by Gershom Scholem who was another philosopher following the publication of her text *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, one of her most famous philosophical works. Um, she herself was originally German, she was born in 1906, raised as a progressive secular Jew, as so many German Jews were. And who probably felt more German than Jewish, you know, that was a very common experience until the rise of the Nazi party in the 1930s in Germany, when it became very very clear that those two identities could not live together. She was arrested, and briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo for performing illegal research into antisemitism in Nazi Germany, and subsequently moved to America. And her writing following this experience of the Holocaust for me, a historical fact, for her something that she lived so close to. Totally shaped her philosophical thinking. It's honestly staggering to think about what the Holocaust was. More than six million Jews were killed by the Nazis. And I learned recently that that is more than a third of the total number of Jews alive at that time around the whole world. So, just the extent of the horror is beyond our imagination, honestly. And so, my response to something like that would have been like, well there is evil. Like, look at what they were doing. Look at the intention they had. Look at the skill in which they were executing that wordless horror. And yet she does something completely different. In this book in which she writes about the banality of evil. What she points to is not the willfulness, but it's the absence of resistance to the machinery of the state. It's the ease in which people allow decisions that they know to be wrong to be executed and to participate in that execution, because of the way in which we shift

blame and allow other people to hold the responsibility. And so, the exact quote that I wanna bring you is not from that book itself, *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, but it's in this letter that she's – she's responding to a conversation for. It's a little long, but I wanna read the whole thing. So she writes this: "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never radical. That it is only extreme. And that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension." Right, this is where she's saying it's not about that intentionality. "It can overgrow and lay waste to the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is thought defying, as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its banality. Only the good has depth that can be radical." So, she's contrasting goodness as something that goes deep, that has that intentionality, that – that reaches down to the roots, right? Where that word radical comes from. Evil on the other hand is like, you know, she uses that language of a fungus, or you can think of a – a sort of a mist, this thing that just settles between and through and then does damage. So, for me, that's a – a really compelling illustration of what evil is. If it's distributed, if it's pernicious. And horrifically effective.

V: Yeah. And, can I just add a bit of context?

C: Yeah.

V: To what you I think so beautifully said, that the letter is commenting on, as you said, her treatise *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where Eichmann, who was you know, a war criminal and responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews, kept saying on the stand "I was just following orders."

C: Right.

V: And she took that to be the height of evil. And I just think that that's such a – this sentence is so beautifully defining what about that line of "I was just following orders," why it's evil. Because she's saying, it's not like he was up there on the stand saying, "I hate Jews and wanted them all to die."

C: Right.

V: Right? He just wasn't questioning.

C: Yeah, exactly. And – and in so many ways, Eichman is a stand-in for the overwhelming majority of people living under Nazi rule. And who had facilitated it, or at least not resisted it. Right? The way in which it's so easy to point the blame elsewhere, or to say, "well I was only doing this, or I was just the train driver, or I was just the person who was knocking on doors to bring people to the train station" Right? Like, all of the ways in which so many people participated. Sure, they didn't themselves turn on the gas or pull the trigger, but without them it wouldn't have happened. And so, it's like a picture of you know when you see an abandoned building and it has been overgrown by that kind of lichen and moss and that fungus. And there's no individual little plant that did the whole job. But as a system it completely destroys even the tallest tower.

V: Right. [pause] So, I – I'm wondering how much this text helps you with your question. Because she doesn't define evil. She defines evil as thought defying. Which is a little abstract.

C: Mhmm.

V: So is she saying that if – every time you're thoughtless that you're behaving by rote, you are being evil?

C: The way I understand it, and why I liked it, is it's not just saying the absence of good. Right? That as we dismissed up top. She's saying it's the absence of thought, it's the absence of depth, of interrogating ourselves, of interrogating one another and situations that we're in. I love this image of depth versus shallowness that she offers. Because I think in so many ways, I and so many of us get pulled in to shallowness of living, right, it's easier to not just go with the flow or – or to follow the rules. But to not seek out depth because depth can be arresting or startling or – or painful to engage with, right? Reading in detail about what's happened in a far-off country, or even in my own neighborhood, about something that's really hard. It demands something of me that something I don't sometimes I don't like giving. But I feel like that's what she's asking of us to resist evil, is like you have to engage. You have to challenge, you have to be – you have to be willing to go to the root of things. Not – not just to accept the obvious answer, or to – to read the headline and leave it at that. So, I feel like the definition she's giving me is about like, laziness versus activity.

V: I mean, I guess my question in response to that, though, is – so how do we know that we're doing it? Because it seems to me obvious that I would not want to have been the train conductor driving Jews to the concentration camps. But where I can see myself is as the secretary to someone, where it's like, well I have two kids, and I have mouths to feed. And then one step further from that, I'm pretty sure that I do that now. Right?

C: That's what I was gonna say. Yeah.

V: And like I try, right, like I'm a vegetarian and I try to drive as little as possible and I am a thoughtful consumer, and whatever. But like, I demonstrably make the world worse every day that I'm alive. Right? I mean like, I use a cell phone, and the cobalt is mined by children in the Congo. And that is something that is just like, theoretical enough for me that I do it without any sacrifice. I know that there are you know, slavery free phones, but they don't work as well as the iPhone, and so I have an iPhone. That is evil. And I – I don't really know what the difference is, between that and being the train driver to some extent. Like, isn't everyone evil? And just like, Eichmann is the most evil? He is like, head of the class. Number one evil. Adolf Eichmann. [Casper laughs]

C: I mean, I so agree with you. Right? Like we are all caught up in these systems and those systems have evil outcomes. They do. Whether it's around consumption, whether it's around incarceration, whether it's around I mean you can just make a list.

V: Right. Why aren't I lighting my hair on fire, like, in front –

C: Right.

V: --of prisons every day of my life?

C: Right. And – and I think this is why her definition is so effective, because that mist, right, gets into all of us. And so all of us, and I'm with you, I – I – I make the same decision every day. I'm not out there protesting after work. And I could be. And if we all were, it would be a different world. And that is one of the most frustrating things – at least in my early years of activism was like, I was that person. Right? Not – I wasn't setting my hair alight, but like I had friends going on hunger strike for forty days, right? I was trying to get everyone to go to certain marches and get petitions and lobby and do you know actions

that would get media attention. And it was the most frustrating experience to look at my parents, to look at my friends, and broader circles of people who were like “oh I agree with you but like, meh.” And now I’m one of those people. On so many issues. Like, yes I’ll give money, yes I’ll show up to like big rallies, yes I’ll write to Congresspeople, but like by and large, I’m part of the moss. You know what I mean? Like I’m -- I’m part of the mist. And I think it’s partly this learned, not apathy but learned helplessness. That is part of what she’s pointing to, like, I – I feel shallow in my inactivity, or in my – in my sense that we’ve already lost in some way. I don’t know. I guess what I’m trying to say is it costs a lot to go to the depth in the way that she’s trying to point us to. Like, that people who are leading social movements who wake up every day trying to solve these problems, like, with their bodies, with their minds, with their hearts and pockets and everything else, it hurts. It – it hurts to do that. And so often I’m – I feel like a coward.

V: So my question then, I guess, is: if we believe that evil is this moss, who is good? Is there no goodness except for saints? Like, do you have to be [pause] perfect and a martyr and like die young and die for your cause in order to be good?

C: I just had a really interesting image enter my mind, because of our experience with this pandemic, which is that we’ve experienced a sort of mist or sort of moss that’s spreading. And the way in which each of us has or has not participated in the spreading of that moss. Right? And all the ways in which privilege and – and – and the necessity of being out in the world impacts that. But I’m wondering if the image of a virus might actually be helpful in the sense that no one is going to be perfect, or at least it’s – it’s very very difficult and impractical to be perfect, right, to stay in one room and never leave it for more than a year. But, at the same time, there are many things that we can do to ameliorate the rate of moss spreading, as it were. The way of evil spreading. By wearing a mask, by keeping social distance, by avoiding travel etcetera etcetera etcetera. And if we all do as much as we can, then – then we have a collective impact. And so I – I’m thinking that it’s not necessary for everyone to become martyrs or saints. But it is necessary for everyone to like, wear the mask. Cut back the moss. You know, make sure that they get tested regularly. Get the vaccine when it’s available. Right, like, that there are things that we can choose to do, that I can choose to do, that limit the spread of evil. If we – if we use that image. That feels quite helpful actually. I hadn’t thought of that.

V: So this question that you brought, right, was this moment in time where you and Sean were like, maybe we should lave the country. So do you now feel like you can look back on the Trump administration and say like, yeah, it was evil. It was thought defying.

C: [sighs] I feel like it explains half of it. Like, I feel like it explains Trumpism. I mean, fake news it’s like the ultimate example of thought defying, right? Like, but it doesn’t explain him. And that feels like it’s missing it – it explains the enabling by Republicans in Congress, it feels like the enabling by the media and private companies that benefitted, hello Twitter and other social media sites, right? That benefitted from that Trumpism. And the reaction against it, right, like that whole system that was built around this particular person. But it – it doesn’t explain him. And that’s the bit that I’m still I guess the most scared of, is like I don’t think it was just a lack of love in his childhood. Right? Like there was something moving, not necessarily from him but at least through him, that made it worse. That made him nastier and crueler and just more evil. That – that this feels like it doesn’t quite get there.

V: So you think he as an individual is evil.

C: I think he did evil things. [pause] I think he was motivated by it, like there was something [pause] there was something victorious in the evil-ity. I – I don’t know – there was something like – even just the



like “cry more libs” kind of angle, right, that you would see people from the right pointing to someone else’s pain and suffering. I – that’s not – that’s not just discourse. That’s not just disagreement, like, it’s not just cruelty, like, it – it feels demonic, honestly! [laughs] Those are the words that I’m reaching for, and I know – I know that sounds kind of strange.

V: No, it doesn’t feel strange. It just then, yeah, then I agree with you that this Hannah Arendt definition, as helpful and eloquent as it is, like, does not explain whatever evil is inside Trump.

C: It’s inadequate. It feels like there’s something more. Like, I love this –

V: Right.

C: And – and yet – you know what I mean?

V: It’s necessary, but not sufficient.

C: Ugh. Yes.

V: So let’s turn to another text. Which I am sure you brought us.

[short music interlude]

C: So, the second text that I’m bringing is one that you may be familiar with [laughs] because it is Voldemort’s re-embodiment scene at the end of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, book number four in the Harry Potter series.

V: This is the best chapter [Casper laughs] in the whole series.

C: Right? It’s my favorite.

V: Yes.

C: And I actually wanna look at the movie scene of this moment when – when Lord Voldemort kind of comes back to life, or at least comes back to his body, rather than the book because it’s so visual and it – and it’s the visual image that I wanna do a close reading of. And I wanna be clear that you know, as Vanessa and I cohosted Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, we’ve vehemently disagreed with JK Rowling’s transphobia, so we’re very careful to not try and support her in particular, and so I’m not gonna recommend that you watch this movie, but you can find a clip free on YouTube of this particular moment if you – if you wanna find a visual for it. And in the story, this is really the kind of middle point of the entire seven book series. It’s the moment in which this shadow, this uh kind of evil presence of Voldemort comes back into full power, comes back into his body. And the second half of the whole storyline really begins, um this – this real showdown between Harry and Voldemort. So, the exact moment I want us to look at is the moment that he is re-embodied. Wormtail, this kind of very dodgy helper character, is bringing the different ingredients together and he says this particular spell and he says, “The enemy shall rise again.” And puts a little bit of Harry’s blood into a cauldron that bubbles and toils and troubles, and out comes this uh, Ralph Fiennes-shaped Voldemort without a nose. [Vanessa laughs] Um, but – but the thing that’s really interesting to me is it’s not just the ingredients in the cauldron. It’s not just the like, weird baby-shaped Voldemort that goes into the cauldron. It’s this black mist that is attracted to the cauldron—

V: Hmm.

C: --which ends up forming his robe. So, on a very simple read, you could say oh, here is just pieces of a robe being conjured into existence. But the way that I read it was that there was some sort of evil [pause] that exists, that was called into form. That was assembled, that was directed, that was made real, because someone wanted it to be real. Right? There was a spell, there was an intention, there was clarity that we wanted this to happen. And the enemy shall rise again. And I – I actually love that particular word of “enemy” because it’s often a word within the biblical tradition used to describe the devil or Satan. So, we can leave that to one side, or include it, but it – it was a nice reference for me of – of the example of when evil is personified, or it’s made concrete. And for me, all of that gives, right, a counterpoint to the Arendt definition that we’ve been talking about, where it’s this – the same kind of misty figure, but it doesn’t locate itself in one place. It doesn’t start with an intention. And here, in Voldemort’s re-embodiment, there’s a clarity and a – and a personification of it that I find quite compelling and quite frightening.

V: Amen Brother Casper. I – I don’t know how – uh – preach. Jews don’t do that. [Casper laughs] So I’m looking for language. But that is my way of saying I loved everything you just said. I love this idea that there is like a catalyst for evil. There is somebody who’s willing to let themselves be a cauldron—

C: Hmm.

V: -- of evil. And let themselves be the main ingredient in that cauldron. But you need other stuff in order for it to be effective. Right? Like, somebody with the intent of murdering –

C: Mhmm.

V: -- needs guns available, or needs [pause] lax security, or needs – I – I don’t know, right?

C: Mhmm.

V: You can’t be totally evil on your own. You need both. But I – I love this visual of this dust that is being called, and I think that there’s some dust that like, rises more quickly, and some that has to be shaken loose.

C: And I even wonder, like, how much Wormtail really wanted it? Do you know what I mean? Like, that’s part of this for me, is that even when we think we know what we’re dealing with, when we’re calling up something evil, that it’s bigger than what we know how to handle. So for example, Wormtail is the one who summons Voldemort back to life. Right? Like, he creates the potion, he even cuts off his own hand to put it in there. He does all of these things to bring Lord Voldemort back, and then we have that fabulous moment where Voldemort kind of arises from the cauldron, and he runs his hands over his kind of scalp hair, and is you know, living his full fantasy of being in a hair commercial or something. And then the first thing that Voldemort does is to say, “Wormtail, give me your hand.” And so Wormtail is thinking “great, like, I’ve done this thing for you, you’re gonna give me my hand back, it’s a party!” And so he gives Voldemort like a bloody stump of an arm to kind of fix his hand. And Voldemort says “No, the other one.” And uses the other wrist to summon the Death Eaters, because – because of the tattoo that’s on Wormtail’s arm. Only later does he give Wormtail a – a metal hand which isn’t even under his own control. Right? Voldemort still controls his — his metal hand from afar. So I – I guess what I find so compelling about that is that [pause] evil has a mind of its own. And I don’t even know if I wanna say that evil is Voldemort, right, like, evil is even beyond Voldemort. It’s just that it’s in Voldemort right now.

That's also what I love about that language, the enemy shall rise again. It's explaining this specific moment in the story, but it's always true. Right? Evil is always returning, it's always coming back, it has this terrifying desire to be here, and do things. [Casper makes a noise of disgust that I can't spell, then laughs]

V: So Casper, I think I keep steering you away from something cuz I don't like it, but I gotta – I gotta dive in. Do you think that evil is like, a ghost that gets summoned, like you think it's a spirit? You think it potential – like what is your wildest theory of what evil is?

C: I mean I'm smiling as you ask me that question cuz it sounds so ridiculous, like, no. Right? Like I don't – I don't think there's a directory of like little evil spirits being like "oh I'm being called into where?" [Vanessa laughs] Brooklyn New York, okay I'll see ya later. Give me a couple years to work my magic." And if we say we want to harm, if we're inviting that reality into our imagination, into the world. I – I guess I'm saying that it feels like [pause] there's something that wants to help us do it. And I – I – Oh gosh I feel so silly even saying that out loud, but it – it feels like someone is greasing the wheels, or right, when you watch the winter Olympics and there's those scrubbers in the curling, like, it feels like something is making it easier to fall into that action. And that there's somehow a desire from beyond me to facilitate things that will harm other people. I just can't shake the feeling that it's not just emptiness.

V: Can you give an example of that? Because it doesn't feel easy to me. I know that I am evil sometimes, but I think it is mostly unconscious and when I am conscious of it, I don't find it easy to do it. What I believe in wholeheartedly isn't evil but is brokenness. First of all, there's certain people who just want chaos. They're like, I don't know what's gonna work and so I wanna watch it all burn. But I think that's banality, I think if they actually thought it through and thought about what was burning and who it would harm, they wouldn't do it.

C: And I guess that's where I disagree. That's where I disagree, because [pause] I believed that in 2016, I couldn't believe it in 2020. Because people knew it was burning, and still seventy-four million Americans chose for more burning. And either you then have to believe that the people who are burning are worthy of it, right, that they don't deserve better, or that there's some pleasure in seeing other people burn. And I'm sure that could be directed right back at me, you know, in – in a different context that I – I don't take seriously enough the pain of others in a different situation and – and I'm sure they're right. But it was that shield of ignorance that I no longer believed. Right? Like, if only people realized, or if – if they knew what it really meant. I was like, you know. And you're still choosing this. And that's – that's – that's what I didn't – I still don't really know what to do with that. Where does it come from?

V: Evil is like sadism plus power. [pause] Maybe.

C: Yeah. Maybe this is the image that I'm landing on. Is that it's both a center and a system. That there is the moss growing, there is the mist that is everywhere and that we're all part of, to our unending shame. And also, it needs someone or a moment in which there is a choice to be like, I'm gonna do this even though I know it's wrong. And not because I have some higher competing value, like Valjean stealing bread to save himself because he's starving. It's a choice that's made to inflict suffering for one's own pleasure or power or pursuit of something that one deems worthy of someone else's suffering.

V: I'm really compelled by what you said, Casper, cuz I – and I agree with you, as soon as I said, like, I don't think people like to watch things burn, I – I do think that some people like to watch things burn.

C: It just takes us into a really scary territory. Right? Because am I gonna sit here and be like “you’re evil, you’re not”? I definitely don’t wanna be in that position. But at the same time, this kind of bland “oh everyone would mean well if they really knew each other.” I don’t believe in that anymore. It just hasn’t been true.

V: I mean I just – I wanna say I’m sorry. Like, that’s so sad. That was me, that’s my job. To believe that people like to watch the world burn. You were the person in our friendship who was like, “Uh-uh!”

C: “People are good!” [laughs]

V: “People are good! They’re trying!” The question is like, why do some people wanna watch the world burn? And I – I guess I still believe that that comes, for most people, from a place of hurt. And I’m wondering if you no longer think that, or you think it doesn’t matter?

C: I mean, I – I still believe in goodness. It’s – it’s not like that has disappeared. I just think I believe in an equally powerful or at least somewhat powerful badness. And yes, trauma begets trauma, but – but it feels to me at this point that there is more than just that. And I – and I think that’s – that’s where I’m landing in some way, of putting these two texts together, is that evil is facilitated through that mess, and through that banality, and we have to withstand it through an integrity of thought and a depth of engagement. But that we should also not underestimate the enemy [laughs] if I can use that language, right, like, that if we think it’s just an absence of good or if we think it’s just this formless hurt-ness, that – that we haven’t really understood what we’re dealing with. Whether it’s in the human psyche, or whether it’s a force from beyond the human psyche, I don’t know.

V: Yeah.

C: But there is -- at least there is more to contend with than I had previously thought of, with evil, and I guess I’m saying that out loud to myself now. [laughs] Yeah.

V: So, so we’re – where we’re landing is that evil has a potential embodiment, but that it can only really thrive in a system that backs it up.

C: Yes.

V: And that evil potentially has its own power. That is like, its own engine. And train.

C: Hmm.

V: All in one.

C: Yeah, and we build the track or, or we leave it stuck in the mud, right.

V: Okay. I think that there is so much more to talk about [Casper laughs] so we are going to do our first ever two-episode series on a topic. Cuz I don’t think [laughing] we cracked evil. Not even you and me and forty minutes could crack evil!

C: [laughs] Well I think the question that I’m really left with is like, so what do I do? Right? Like –

V: Right.

C: --if this is my conception of evil, and who knows, it may change again in the future. But if this is where I am, what – what do I do about it?

V: Well Casper, thank you so much for bringing this, like, really difficult question and conversation, and you've given me so much to think about.

C: Well, thanks for – thanks for helping me figure it out, Vanessa, and thank you to Hannah Arendt, and, uh, to Tom Riddle slash Lord Voldemort. You've been very helpful. [laughs]

V: As always. One last thing before we go. We are planning an upcoming episode all about Boundaries. When to say no to someone and something, and when to say yes. And we are looking for voicemails about a time that you said no to something that you wish you had said yes to. That literally has never happened to me in my life. So, please call in.

C: I was gonna say, that sounds like a question I need help with, so thank you in advance. [both laugh]

[theme music begins]

C: You've been listening to The Real Question. We can only make this show thanks to your support, and if you have the means to help us out, please do check out our incredible Patreon at [patreon.com/realquestionpod](https://patreon.com/realquestionpod) And if you've loved the show, spread the word! Leave us a review on iTunes, follow us on Instagram and Facebook @realquestionpod and on Twitter @therealqpod

V: We are a Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is Arian Nedelman and our music is by Nick Bohl. And we are distributed by Acast. We want to thank Jordan for her voicemail this week, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Meghan Kelly, Molly Baxter, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our Patrons. Thank you so much everyone, we will talk to you next week about more evil.

C: [in an evil voice] Evil!

V: [Both Vanessa and Casper begin their supervillain laughter] Mwahahaha!

C: Ho ho ho ha ha!

V: Mwahaha

C: Mwahahaha! [genuine giggle] [Back to normal voice] It's a full doctor evil moment. [laughs]

[theme music continues, fades, ends]