To: Professor Yoo O’Meafavor  
College of the Inhumanities  
Marquis de Sade University  
Hells Gate, South Dakota  
15 April 1991

Dear Professor O’Meafavor:

I am writing to lend full and unqualified support to Fury Hollowman in his attempt to become an assistant professor of wrongdoing.

If acts are any indication of character, then Mr. Hollowman is quite evil indeed. On numerous occasions, he has consciously, voluntarily, and willfully done great harm to other people. Rest assured, Fury never counts as evil those acts that produce only a minimal amount of harm to others. He is contemptuous of half-hearted evildoers — whom he dubs “minimalists” (a minimalist is neither benefactor nor malefactor, but a moral agent who does a minimal amount of good and/or evil) — and their mediocre moral report cards. Not surprisingly, Fury’s idol is Lady MacBeth, whose poster, incidentally, hangs above his bed.

What impresses me about Fury is the wide range of motives that spur him to action: personal gain, spite, hatred, an irrational sense of justice, sadism. At times, he even does evil with no apparent motive in mind. This evil genius has also shown the capability to do evil through both activity and inactivity.

By revealing a little about Mr. Hollowman’s views on evil, you will gain a better understanding of the man.

Hollowman adheres to a distinction between “evil” and “bad” acts. The former do great harm to others, the latter minimal harm. This distinction is analogous to the one in law between a felony and a misdemeanor. It prevents us from gross categorization, say by placing the acts of a professional killer on the same moral plane as those of an adulterer. The designa-
tion "evil" is reserved for only those acts at the upper echelon of wrongdoing, those that inflict enormous harm.

The notion of evil is tied up with a tacit assumption: Those who do no harm deserve no harm. This is what Hollowman calls the "principle of innocence." The "innocent," from the Latin innocere, meaning "not" (in) "to harm" (nocere), are the "not-to-be-harmed." Doing minimal harm to the innocent is bad, not evil. Nor can doing great harm to counter great harm qualify as evil. If, for instance, great harm can be justified on grounds of self-defense, it cannot be considered evil. Situations arise in which great harm to other beings can be morally justified. What comes to mind is the soldier on the battlefield or someone brutalized by an abusive person or a sexual assailant. Besides self-defense we can justify inflicting great harm on another in other instances as well, such as a mother stabbing a retreating attacker who had just killed her child. By contrast, clear-cut instances of evildoing include: unprovoked killing, rape, torturing a sentient being for pleasure, and sexually abusing a child. Evil occurs when a moral agent consciously, voluntarily, and willfully does great harm to the innocent. A fine case study of evildoing can be found in The Count of Monte Cristo as three men conspire to imprison an innocent sailor (Edmond Dantès).

The identity of the innocent may depend to some extent on the situation and one's perspective. But even assuming the identity of the innocent is variable, the notion emerges that some people do not deserve to be harmed. Many consider it evil when terrorists kill innocent people, especially children. In the same vein, Faust does evil when he kills kindly Philemon and Baucis for no other reason than to extend his sprawling empire. In The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan relates the tale of a boy brutally killed by a prince after he inadvertently injures one of the prince's dogs. "Why do innocent children have to suffer?" Dostoyevski asks. He is greatly disturbed by the terrible harm done to innocent people by a "good" God.

According to Hollowman, how evil is related to innocence can be clarified by turning to the question of God's omnibenevolence. One reason we have nagging doubts about a perfectly good God is that God apparently permits great harm to occur to those who don't deserve it. In Candide, Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" thesis is pilloried by introducing endless examples of how great harm occurs to people who did nothing to deserve their cruel fates. Many have no reservations about God smiting the wicked; but when those we deem innocent incur great harm, we suspect — whether justifiably or not — that God is the author of evil. Following this line of thought, we can say that those who orchestrate Dantès's imprisonment are evil, for they consciously, voluntarily, and willfully do great harm to an innocent person. None of the conspirators can justify his acts on grounds of self-defense (the motives include envy, political gain, elimina-