Although evil has been the primary concern of European man from the period of ancient Greek tragedies and political thought onward, after Rousseau, by relativizing the profoundness of the problem, it was considered a real possibility that evil is the product of the malfunctioning of institutions, that is, evil is neither primordial nor radical nor the inevitable outcome of human will. Modern philosophy has flirted with the abolition of evil by taking total control of nature and human drives. The precondition of a showdown with evil is to demonstrate that man is good by his very nature. This proposal has become an illusion; thus politics is now considered as an instrument of how to tackle evil. But evil is still with us despite the discovery of history as a savior idea. Since there is no return in human history, all we can say is that we are still exposed to evil more than ever before in history, because we no longer take evil seriously. Evil is, however, either radical or banal. What follows is aimed to face the modern alternative of institutions versus evil with respect to how ancients succumbed to fate, offering virtue as the only way of controlling evil. Institutional handling of evil, however, requires the discovery of history—the method of how to reconcile thought with action, the particular with the universal, law with rationality, and fate with power. But when historical progress was combined with technological dominance, the inclination for totality of power was solidified into a scientifically boosted modern constitutional framework.

Source of Good and Source of Evil

In his almost forgotten book, Soame Jenyns wrote about political evil the following in 1757: “As to Government in general, it is no wonder, that it
is so productive of Evil, since its very Nature consists of Power trusted in the hands of such imperfect and vicious Creatures as Men, and exercised over others as imperfect and vicious as themselves; in which there must be Pride, Avarice and Cruelty on one Side, Envy, Ignorance and Obstinacy on the other; and Injustice and Self-Interest on both.”

The major issue is whether Jenyns’s insightful judgment of politics as being “so productive of Evil” is to be judged as historically or analytically valid statement. Jenyns, who was also a politician, discussed political evil together with religious evil in the fifth letter of his book. The basis of his joint treatment of the political and religious evil is explained by him in the following way: “I shall endeavour to shew you, that it is utterly impossible, even for Omnipotence itself, to give a perfect Government, or a perfect Religion to an imperfect Creature; and therefore, that the numberless imperfections inherent in all human Governments and Religions, are not imputable to God, nor any defect of power, wisdom, or goodness in Him; but only to the inferiority of Man’s station in the Universe, which necessarily exposes him to Natural and Moral Evils, and must, for the same reason, to Political and Religious.”

Clearly, the obvious conflict is between what is perfect and what is not. Even omnipotence is short of creating perfect religion or government, thus whatever man does is by far short of perfection. Even if it is true, it needs to be explained why political evil is the summation of all evils. “So productive of evil” suggests that politics has a special character that attracts man to commit evil. Is it human nature writ large or there is something new in the understanding or perception of political power in the eighteenth century that led the author to his radical views? The explosive combination of a power and an imperfect creature, that is, man would yield evil not to be experienced in other fields of life. And the greater the means or instruments or institutions of man available to govern himself, the more powerful the state or government would be; therefore the farther progress proceeds, the potential of political power will increase. This is the paradox of human power: power must be that ingredient of the combination of perfectness and the imperfectness, which has a unique stance in man’s life, and what is more, it has a more direct impact on it than that of God or any other perfect being that is certainly incomparably more powerful than man. Whatever the final source of power created by man, whether it is justified by divine will or popular support, it has a direct and almost unchallengeable influence upon man’s life, and thus it is the ultimate source of evil as it is experienced in public life.

But what is power, and is it really true that the greatest source of evil is politics? Or is it human nature that is so permeated with a propensity