

LETTER XV
The Devil, Arcanum of Intoxication
Le Diable

Study guide by Carl McColman



Talk to Christians, or other persons, who are not seasoned in the practice of contemplative forms of prayer, and try to tell them about the experience of non-duality. Often the person will reply, “But what about evil?” Likewise, try to explain opposition to the death penalty from a spiritual or religious perspective and many will object, “But then how do we stop violent crime?”

For some reason, the human brain seems to be wired to snap out of non-dual perception or experience by a more reptilian, fear-based, response: *non-duality cannot be true because we live in a world where evil exists*. This, in a nutshell, explains how the Devil — the arcanum of intoxication, or “counter-inspiration” — comes right on the heels of Temperance, which among other things represents the Angel of “Integrated Duality” (or non-duality).

The Devil represents an important principle for those serious about the mystical life. Notice we are only about 2/3 of the way through our journey through the Major Arcana. This is not the big, climactic fight at the end, like you get in a Marvel Comics movie. Rather, this arcanum represents an all-too common experience for those who are “halfway up the mountain” — the unexpected and humbling setback that often follows a profound moment of union or grace.

The Devil does not show up now to repudiate the lessons learned from Temperance, but rather to remind us that our work is not yet done. After the mystical vision of the angel with the flowing fluids of inspiration, it would be premature (not to mention presumptuous) to declare ourselves enlightened! But it is an all-too-human temptation nonetheless. The Devil, counterintuitive thought it may be, seems nevertheless to perform a necessary task on the mystical journey: a reminder that any grace received is just that — a grace — and that we still have our shadow to contend with, our imperfections, our addictions or tendencies to addiction, our capacity for narcissism, violence, and ego-inflation, and the like. The Devil comes to accuse us, but our Guardian Angel has *not* abandoned us; merely allows us to face the trickster head on, knowing that even the encounter with evil can contribute to our ultimate liberation.

Right now, I should interject an important disclaimer about the language of addiction. We know that addiction — especially alcohol, nicotine and narcotic addictions — are more properly understood as physiological diseases than moral failings. Equating intoxication with the Devil is *not* meant to imply that addiction is merely a type of sin. The Devil is perhaps best seen as a force of oppression — our author equates the devil with slavery — and who, in the grip of a powerful addiction, has not experienced it as a type of bondage? Indeed, recovery programs begin their twelve steps with a humble acknowledgement that the person suffering an addiction is

powerless to shake the addiction merely by force of will (if it were that easy, most people with addictions would gladly be rid of the burdens associated with their addiction). To reduce addiction to a mere “moral failing” is to indulge in the heresy of Pelagianism, which suggests that human beings retain control over their own salvation. While that is a comforting thought especially to those who lead privileged lives and are accustomed to retaining control over their life choices, in plain fact most of us do *not* have control over something as simple as the ability to choose to stop drinking, gambling, watching porn, etc. Most people who recover from addiction do so through grace, even if they are not theists — reliance on a “higher power” can be transformational even for those who reject traditional faith. The reason for this, of course, is simple: the source of grace wants to bless us whether we believe in that source or not!

I think the recovery movement has given Christianity a great gift: as we have learned that there is no benefit in morally judging those who are harmed by their addictions, there is a powerful echo of one of Jesus’s more radical teachings: “Judge not, so that you will not be judged” (Matthew 7:1). We know it is pointless to judge those who suffer from addiction; it only makes sense to begin to see *all* sinful or unloving behavior as types of “addiction” to which we are all more or less powerless, at least by ourselves. When we learn to stop judging those who make unloving choices and simply to support those who want to reorient their lives toward love, we are embodying the spirit of Temperance; but when we judge someone (including ourselves, and even including the most “sinful” person one can imagine, like a Hitler or a Stalin), we are precisely then channeling the cynical, unkind, hypercritical energy of — you guessed it — the Devil.

Incidentally, for this course, this is the one Letter where I am not creating an exercise to accompany the study guide and key quotations. My reasoning comes from this passage early in the Letter:

But before we begin the meditation on the Arcanum of counter-inspiration, we must take account of the intrinsic difference between meditation on the other Arcana and meditation on the Arcanum “The Devil”. It is as follows.

As it is a matter in the Tarot of a series of spiritual or Hermetic exercises, and as, on the other hand, every spiritual exercise tends to lead to the identification of the meditant with the subject of meditation, i.e. to an act of intuition, the fifteenth Arcanum of the Tarot, in so far as it is a spiritual exercise, cannot—and must not—lead to an experience of identification of the meditant with the subject of meditation. One should not arrive at an intuition of evil, since intuition is identification, and identification is *communion*. (Page 402)

In other words: to the extent that there can be a “spiritual exercise” for Arcanum XV, it must be fundamentally different from all the spiritual exercises correlated to all the other arcana. Generally speaking the spiritual exercises involve a meditative act of identifying with the archetypal or spiritual energies associated with the subject of the card (the High Priestess, the Pope, the Hermit, etc.) in order to receive inspiration from this archetypal figure and thereby embody its energies in our own spiritual lives. Obviously, the Devil is not meant to be a figure for emulation! If there is any spiritual exercise appropriate for this Arcanum, it would be to set boundaries — just as setting boundaries is an essential practice for anyone in recovery. When the Devil appears in our lives, we need to seek liberation, healing, salvation (which Anglican solitary Maggie Ross defines as “being sprung from a trap”) — *not* identification with its diabolical energy.

As you read through this Letter, our unknown author will invite you to reflect on various images and archetypes of the Devil, including Satan from the book of Job, and Asmodeus from the deuterocanonical book of Tobit. But perhaps the most challenging idea in this meditation will be the author’s insistence that mere mortal human beings — people like you and I — can “engender” (create) demonic entities through the power of our imagination and will. If you are like me, you may find yourself recoiling from this very idea. How can I claim such spiritual power, that demons can be borne merely out of my own spirituality creativity? But then consider the Biblical teaching which our author has mentioned, that we are created in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:27). What can be more godlike, more evidentiary that we are stamped with the divine image, than our ability to create — if not in real, physical, material ways, then at least in the theatre of our own imagination? Think about a figure like Othello, who “created” such a story about his wife’s infidelity (not true, but based on lies fed to him by Iago) that it drives him mad, with tragic consequences? Or those who become so consumed with believing in a conspiracy theory that they alienate themselves from family and friends? The same can be said of those who join a religious cult or an extremist political group. Our minds are capable of “creating” ways of seeing and thinking that are so compelling to us that they literally re-invent the world we live in. Perhaps our author’s idea that we engender demons is not so far away from the sorry reality that we can warp our view of reality based on nothing more than biases in our own mind?

What Othello, the cultist, and the conspiracy theorist all have in common is the sad fact that their capitulation to their irrational beliefs results in real alienation or worse in their lives. In short, they create a “demon” that goes on to take control of their lives, and they feel powerless to resist such an energy. This, I believe, brings us close to the point our author is trying to make.

So how do we combat such unloving energies? Our author suggests a combination of humility, morality, and clear thinking (reason) as necessary for liberating ourselves from the bondage of lies, oppression and evil. I think we could add to this list the essential importance of *grace*. There is no shame in retreating back to the luminous wonder of Temperance to seek support necessary to face and triumph over the lies of the Devil. In fact, far from being shameful, reliance on the grace of Temperance may well be a sign of wisdom, humility and compassion (including compassion toward oneself). The Devil is a trickster, which means much of its power is based on illusion — on lies (the Devil traditionally is known as the “father of lies”). Just as light is necessary to dispel darkness, truth and clarity naturally help us to dispel the confusing fog of lies, fear-based judgments, leaps to conclusions, and depressed distortions. The Devil will not have the final word in the universe, and so needs not have the final word in our lives as well. Grace, hope, and saving help are ours for the asking. Let us not hesitate to seek the divine support we require.

What to Look for in Letter XV:

As you read through Letter XV, here are some points that might be helpful for you as you seek to reflect on the challenges and the warnings that this archetypal symbol of counter-inspiration and intoxication represents.

1. Our anonymous author begins this meditation by labelling the Devil card as “the Arcanum of *counter-inspiration*” (page 401). It’s helpful to keep in mind that this arcanum represents a parody of or perversion of the angelic being represented by Temperance (Arcanum XIV).
2. On page 403, the author warns his readers, “One ought not to occupy oneself with evil, other than in keeping a certain distance and a certain reserve... one cannot love evil. Evil is therefore unknowable in its *essence*. It’s interesting to compare this to the unknowability of God as represented by *The Cloud of Unknowing* and St. John of the Cross (*Dark Night of the Soul*). But God’s unknowability is due to God’s infinite nature and supreme being, whereas the unknowability of evil is relate to our being created in the image and likeness of God (Love). We know through love and by loving; and since evil cannot be loved, there is a way in which we are ontologically shielded from truly knowing evil (of course, we can love aspects of evil or even evil’s power and allure, so many people fancy that they love evil. But if our author is to be believed, in its pure essence evil is unlovable and therefor unknowable).
3. Also on page 403: “The world of evil is a *chaotic world*— at least, such as it presents itself to the observer.” Since it is the nature of evil to destroy, it is

fundamentally an agent of dissolution and chaos, undermining order in any form it finds it. Good, of course, can also destroy, but it is a destruction always in service of some greater creative act. Evil, by contrast, destroys for the sake of destruction.

4. “The theme of the fifteenth Arcanum of the Tarot is one of the *generation* of demons and of the power that they have over those who generate them.” This is a central theme of this particular letter, and perhaps a key to the entirety of Hermeticism, at least as presented in *Meditations on the Tarot*. The human capacity for imagination is fundamentally creative — but so creative that we are capable of generating psychic entities, which is to say, imaginal beings that become capable of operating independantly of their creator(s). Just as a physical child ultimately asserts its freedom over the will of its parents, so too does the “demon” (the imaginal being produced through our sheer psychic will and imagination) prove capable of operating independently of its creators, and even asserting control over its human source. Even if this idea strikes you as preposterous, consider it from the viewpoint of the believing author: it makes sense to believe in spiritual realities such as demons created by the human psyche, since they are evidence that we live in a world where the imagination is a living reality, and not just some inert imprint of a thinking mind. Accepting the author’s thesis is a way of re-enchanting our world — even though it also includes the frightening warning that we are capable of creating entities that cannot be trusted and can even turn on us (a Wiccan High Priestess I know is fond of saying “Do not conjure up anything that you are incapable of banishing. This seems to be consistent with the ideas that our author relied on when developing this particular meditation).
5. This is not to say that demons are just “figments of our imagination” — although this does imply that many demons are just that. But there is still the traditional cosmology that suggests that hostile and unfriendly spirits were originally rebel angels. According to our author, demons that are “fallen entities of the celestial hierarchies” meet humankind with more subtle and nuanced temptations than the rather down-to-earth temptations that plague most people: temptations to, for example, abuse money, or sex, or power. Such “gross” temptations may come to us from the demonic entities that are ultimately of our own making. The “higher” spirits of evil are less interested in causing us to lose our temper and more invested in cultivating pride, envy, and other subtle dispositions deep within us.
6. Page 407: “magic is the *objectification* of that which takes its origin in subjective consciousness.” A demon is such an objectified emanation of subjective consciousness, whereas a group or hive mind created by multiple persons is more properly called an *egregore* meaning a nonphysical “mind” or sentience that is created by the collective will and imagination of a group of people. If you visit a house or some other setting where ceremonial magical rituals once took place,

and find yourself shivering with anxiety in response to the place itself (“The place gives me the creeps”) you may be responding to the spirit of the place that was created and nurtured over time by the collective will and imagination of all who previously worked/performed ritual in that space. Their collective energy formed a kind of group mind or psychic entity called an *egregore*, from a Greek word meaning “watcher.”

7. Our author suggests that a psychological complex (like an “inferiority complex”) represents a kind of half-formed demonic entity within the soul, that has not sufficiently developed to operate autonomously; thus it is constantly interacting with or reflecting on the conscious awareness of its human “host.” (It must be said that this is a dangerous line of thinking; for example, in the past homosexuality was seen as an expression of a narcissistic or Oedipal “complex” — at least, until such views became impossible to defend scientifically.)
8. The “specter of communism,” an idea made famous by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, could then be seen as a kind of group-generated egregore (see page 408).
9. Page 409: the author equates the traditional Hermetic commitment to silence with a spiritual practice of self-restraint by which one refrains from creating or encouraging this kind of demonic generation — through keeping silence. Silence is also equated with the Arcanum of Temperance (page 410).
10. Page 412: there is a “Scale of Temptation” by which those who grow or mature spiritually are likely to face subtle temptations of a more spiritual nature (many people in our time would find the entire notion of demonic temptation to be ridiculous, if not a kind of religious oppression by which those in power seek to disempower others by shaming them for their “capitulation to temptation”).
11. Pages 415-7: the author offers lengthy quotations from Saint Athanasius’s biography of St. Anthony the Great; St. Teresa of Ávila’s autobiography, and St John of the Cross’s *Dark Night of the Soul* in order to highlight what these mystics had to say about the discernment of spirits — an essential task for anyone who is serious about contemplative practice, for sooner or later all contemplatives have unusual or bizarre experiences of the supernatural/numinous, that require careful discernment to determine if such experiences are truly mystical, or merely the result of one’s own interior processes, or even a visitation from an unfriendly spirit.
12. Although it is possible for an egregore — especially from a highly ethical group with a strong ethos of compassion and service — to express itself in positive ways, properly speaking egregores are by definition inferior to God or to angels and therefore limited in their capacity to do good. With this in mind our author offers some thoughts on the difference between “positive spirits of communities”

- (which always exist by the grace of God) and egregores, which draw their existence strictly from the psychic energy of a group of humans. See page 419.
13. On page 420, the author offers an insightful reflection on how human beings do not *create* grace or goodness so much as we open ourselves to be *conduits* of such energies which flow to us and through us from heaven. “Holy places, miraculous relics, statues and icons, are not depots for the psychic and mental energy of pilgrims and other believers, but rather places or objects where ‘heaven opens and Angels are able to ascend and descend.’ They are points of departure for spiritual radiation.” We serve goodness by consenting to God’s action *through* us.
 14. How do we protect ourselves from the deleterious presence and action of demons? Our author suggests (page 422) that “clarity of thought and rightness of moral attitude” are necessary, but he also advocates for “sacred magic” as an intervention to shore up a sense of psychic self-defense. A briefly described protection ritual at the bottom of page 422 bears a striking similarity to *Caim* prayers — protection prayers associated with Celtic spirituality.
 15. The author presents the idea of a “hierarchy of the left” assuming that some unfriendly spirits are nevertheless given to interact with humanity within the constraints of divine law. If you’re familiar with the Dungeons & Dragon game, this is similar to the D&D concept of “Lawful evil” — an entity that is hostile or subversive of that which is good, but doing so in an orderly and “by-the-book” fashion. The hierarchy of the left may obey God’s laws, but then seeks to enforce those laws ruthlessly and mercilessly with others. As our author puts it, “Satan does not accuse Job of sin committed but of a *potential sin*. And he sets to work so as to actualize it” (page 423). In other words, the hierarchy of the left, shaped by personalities that are bitter and envious, want to undermine others (especially mortals) by enticing them into actions that are unacceptable, and then making sure that the offenders are punished by those who are scandalized.
 16. Page 426 and following: our author finishes the chapter with a helpful discussion of different types of “paganism,” including the philosophical school (embodied by great minds like Plato or Plotinus), mythological paganism (what we might think of as cultic devotions to various gods and goddesses), naturalistic paganism (the adoration of nature and nature’s processes) and finally demoniacal paganism, magical rituals performed specifically to bind demonic spirits and force them to do the magician’s bidding. Very sensibly, the author insists that it is unfair to judge all forms of paganism the same way, and that at least some of these expressions of paganism represent an ethical spirituality that in its own way helped to prepare its adherents for the quantum leaps in human consciousness that the coming and saving actions of Christ represents.

Questions for personal reflection (and, if you wish, communal discussion on our Course Forum):

1. The author suggests that it is inappropriate to design a spiritual exercise in response to the Devil arcanum, since such exercises lead to a kind of identification between the exercitent and the archetypal subject of the meditation. Put it this way: it would be one thing to meditate upon Temperance to achieve a sense of “union” with your guardian angel; but who in their right mind would seek “union” with the devil? Do you agree with this idea that we have no business meditating on the devil, or can you think of an appropriate (and safe) spiritual exercise that could accompany the lessons of this Arcanum? (Hint: could it make sense to create an exercise based on *setting boundaries* with the spirit of evil?)
2. John of the Cross suggests that the presence of a hostile and unfriendly spirit will result in “dryness of spirit, in a tendency to self-esteem, to accept and make much of visions; and in no degree whatever do they produce the gentleness of humility, and love of God” (page 416). Do you think this is a helpful description of what it is like to encounter demonic or unfriendly spirits? What other qualities do you think would be indicative of an encounter with evil (or, for that matter, of an encounter with good)?
3. Our author suggests that “sacred magic” is necessary for protection against demons and/or for combating demonic energy. But is sacred magic the same thing as prayer? Do you believe prayer is an effective form of spiritual self-defense? If not, then what is it that sacred magic does, that prayer cannot do?