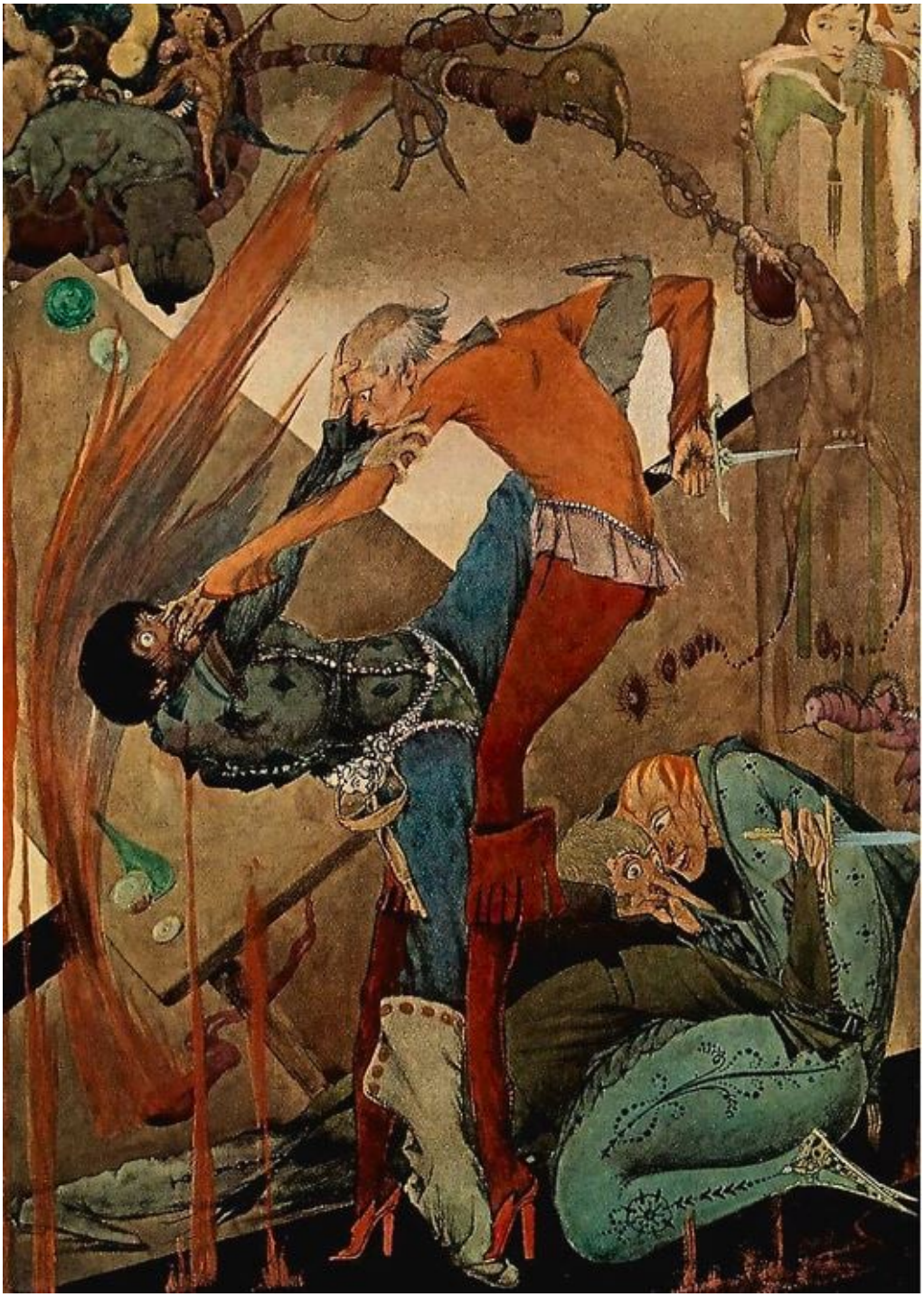
Goethe’s Faust and the Spirit of Negation

by Pedro Blas González (June 2025)



Faust Illustration by Harry Clarke (1925)

Giving the devil his due has never been more appropriate an expression than its sinister embodiment in Goethe's *Faust*. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe makes it plain that the human will, in relation to reason, makes predictability of human behavior and choice-making an immemorial paradox.

Man's great dilemma, vis-à-vis will, reason, and human reality is at least two-fold. One aspect of this dilemma is that the tension between will and reason often makes man a spectator of reality. That is one description of man, especially bedazzled visionaries who take joy in the mystery of being.

Another aspect of man's dilemma of having to manage will and reason comes to light as the deep-rooted, often malignant pride and pleasure that man takes in attempting to deform human reality. The inherent drama of this dilemma takes several dominant shapes—repeating universal themes, and motifs that define the human condition. The distortion of reality is Faust's obsession.

Imagine ten people having to choose a mask for a masquerade party from a pool of ten masks. Now, imagine that this masquerade is repeated for five consecutive nights. Everyone scrambles to find a new mask, creating a new twist on the past, the passé. *How exciting is the new and novel*, the partygoers imagine. Changing masks elicits sensual pleasure. While the changing of the masks creates an apparent short-term veiling of reality, in the long run the veil is eventually lifted, leaving only boredom and tedium, an existential condition that consequently becomes exasperated. This condition is made worse by nihilism's fixation to veil reality. Existential and moral demoralization ensue.

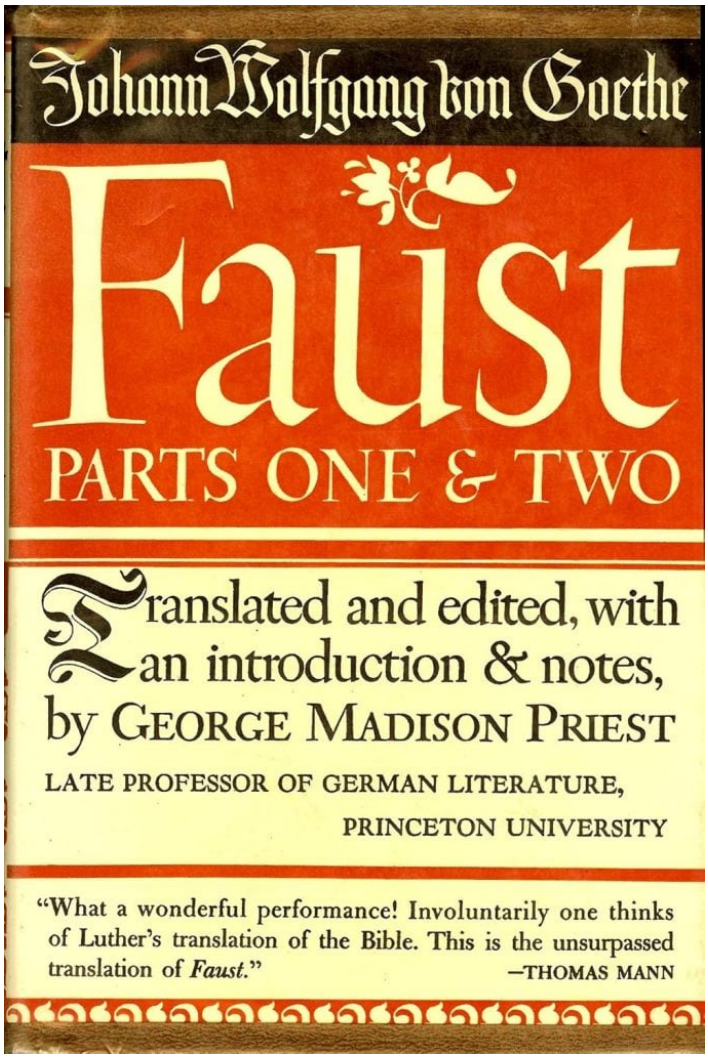
Will and Reason

One of the strains that a corrupted will and reason bring about for man is world-weariness, debilitating boredom and tedium; corrosive ennui that assaults people who have little imagination and abundant self-possessed arrogance.

From the beginning of *Faust*, in ‘Prologue in Heaven,’ God and Mephistopheles have an animated conversation, more of a sparring match on behalf of Mephistopheles. Crafty and wily Mephistopheles mocks God’s alleged naiveté about man’s nature. In turn, God gives the devil his due, as if to let him sink in his own cunning ambition:

> *Of all the spirits of negation*
> *The wag weighs least of all on me.*
> *Mankind’s activity can languish all too easily,*
> *A man soon loves unhampered rest;*
> *Hence, gladly I give him comrade such as you,*
> *Who stirs and works and must, as devil, do.*

As a disciple of Lucifer, the angel of light, Mephistopheles has been in the presence of God since the beginning. This affords him insider knowledge, as it were.



The war in heaven is a decisive moment for good and evil, when Lucifer decides to be number one in his own kingdom rather than being subservient to God. However, to succeed in his quest to sidetrack God's plan for man, Lucifer solicits the loyalty, if not the wrath, envy, and resentment of other caustic angels: his legions.

As a consequence of Lucifer's knowing God's plan for the creation of man (a being of flesh and bone that is animated by a soul), from the beginning of *Faust*, Goethe presents Mephistopheles as a preternatural naysayer, a rabble-rouser who knows better about good and evil. The fact that Mephistopheles knows better about good and evil becomes the cornerstone of moral evil: intent.

The experiment, Mephistopheles' chess game of soul-winning between him and God, turns ominous. Mephistopheles is a cynic

who mocks benevolence; that is, the creation of Being by God. Mephistopheles exalts nothingness over Being. Mephistopheles' negation of Being is the definitive metaphysical epic battle of good and evil that man inherited.

Faust Turns to Magic to Gain Knowledge

Not content to let life be, the restless, bored Faust turns to magic to secure knowledge that he believes he is entitled to. Imagining that the grass is truly greener somewhere else, away from his limited, finite perception of reality, Faust, like a child that does not know when he has had too much candy, questions the nature of human reality, turning himself into a pathological skeptic.

Faust's quest to seek knowledge has been the standard approach of philosophers throughout the centuries. The problem is that Faust, as is the case with dead-end philosophical materialism, ends in in a dark place:

> *Perchance full many a secret I may reach,*
> *So that no more with bitter sweat*
> *I need to talk of what I don't know yet,*
> *So that I may perceive whatever holds*
> *The world together in its inmost folds,*
> *See all its seeds, its working power,*
> *And cease word-threshing from this hour.*

Faust's first allusion to the strain between will (life) and reason (books) has him looking around his library, replete with dusty books, scientific instruments, and 'Beasts skeletons.' He laments the stagnant life he leads: "And still you question why your heart/Is cramped and anxious in your

breast?”

‘All’s well that ends well’ is a commendable ending to the perennial onslaught of human contingencies. Yet when we compare this to Faust’s predicament, we must enlist Euripides’ quip ‘A bad beginning makes a bad ending.’

Faust’s initial mistake is not that he discovers the realm of spirit, but that he enlists the aid of spirits for his self-serving purposes. By enlisting the help of spirits he opens himself up to trickery—the realm of appearances—directed at him by demons. In his case, Mephistopheles is the trickster.

Another aspect of Faust’s pact with the devil is that rather than going out into the world and engaging an active life away from books, he demands that the spirit realm guide him through the sensual world.

Faust’s enlistment of spirits to enable him to gather the fruits of the sensual world is easily contrasted with Socrates’ daimonion (δαιμόνιον), the inner voice that guided the Greek thinker, telling him what he ought not to do in any given situation, and not what to do. The voice of reason, let us call this.

Faust is shocked to discover that a spirit has manifested itself before him. Seemingly agitated, even uninterested at first, the spirit tells him, “By potent spell hast drawn me here, Hast long been tugging at my sphere, And now—”

Summoning a spirit to help him become *self-realized* is the demarcation point for the arrogant Faust to live the life he believes he deserves. If he goes out into the world, momentarily leaving the world of the mind behind, Faust could have become a voyager who seeks action and adventure. Instead, his tale becomes one of eating from the tree of knowledge.

Compared to Socrates, Faust is not an innocent wayfarer of human reality. Socrates served in the Athenian army. He walked

around Athens' agora, conversing and jesting with people. In his own time, Socrates was considered the *wisest* man in Athens by his contemporaries. This is a rare compliment. Socrates accomplished this without having to invoke spirits, even though the Oracle at Delphi said he was the wisest man in Athens, not that Socrates solicited that honor.

Socrates was content to know what he knew and didn't lament his lack of knowledge. Socratic irony, as Socrates' humble approach to knowledge has come to be known, made Socrates realize the limit of reason, where what one knows sheds light on our ignorance. Faust is not privy to this wisdom.

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*, *Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*, *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy* and *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*. He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofia" (1951) in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is *Philosophical Perspective on Cinema*.