

Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation

by Richard Bernstein, Polity Press, 2002, 304 pp.

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Let me get a gripe out of the way before I begin to review seriously this work by a distinguished contemporary philosopher. Notice the sub-title: an 'interrogation.' Is anyone out there as tired as I am of this term? It is by now both clichéd and annoying, conjuring up the image of a poor trembling text in the interrogation room without benefit of counsel, bright lights glaring on its cover, as a couple of policemen turn pages roughly, shouting aggressive questions and hurling accusations. Can we not be gentler with (most) texts and interpret them, or engage in the sort of conversation with them that Michael Oakshott suggested so eloquently? I suspect that Professor Bernstein is unaware of how frequently he 'interrogates,' salting his pages, at times, with more than one 'interrogation' per page. Can we not get off this prosecutorial binge and just read the bloody book!

O.K. That's off my chest. Just how well does Bernstein 'interrogate?' What is the pay-off in clarification and understanding of the language of evil, of what it means to 'name' a deed or a person or a plan 'evil?' My expectations ran high as I opened this tome. Bernstein can always be counted on to offer a rich repast as he traverses the terrain of continental thought, putting before us the familiar figures of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others. Unfortunately, there is a bit of a let-down as one completes one's reading, for reasons that I shall explain.

Bernstein begins by noting that 'philosophers and political theorists are much more comfortable speaking about injustice, the violation of human rights, what is immoral and unethical, than about evil.' (p. 2) It is 'almost as if the language of evil has been dropped from contemporary moral and ethical discourse.' (p. 2) Bernstein wants to resurrect the relevance of the language of evil even as he shares the common view that we have come to the 'irrelevance of theodicy,' indeed its end. This despite the fact that a literary scholar, Andrew Delbanco, argued a few years back in a lively book called *The Death of Satan* that, try as one might, you cannot scour discussions of evil free of their location in theology and, therefore, in the tormenting dilemma of how evil entered a universe a good and all-powerful God declared 'good.' This was before the fall, of course. After the fall it is still good as

ELSHTAIN | Philosophy and Evil

God created it – at the ontological level – but it is deeply flawed: the serpent has entered the garden.

After having thrown down the gauntlet against theodicy, Bernstein segues to Nietzsche's *ressentiment*, the projection of all one hates and despises, and simultaneously covets, onto some external 'other' or 'others.' Brilliant in its unpacking of a particular dynamic, Nietzsche nevertheless psychologises evil, reduces it to psychological predicates, hence: 'the moral psychology of evil.' Lurking behind all of this (though unremarked on by Bernstein) is the neo-Protestant motive ethics in Kant and post-Kantian moral philosophy – all who had abandoned the Aristotelianised Thomism of the Latin Church. Heretofore the only 'good thing is a good will,' a radical interiorisation of both good and evil, followed by a stress on the personal embrace of good maxims. Offering a discussion along these lines would have been more illuminating than the exegetical exercise Bernstein offers, characterised by the intelligence and erudition we have come to expect from him. But it seems a bit flat – not quite rising to the occasion.

Bernstein's unpacking of Hegel and Schelling is rich in insight and the strongest part of the book. He focuses on the harrowing fact that Hegel insists that evil is a 'necessary dialectical moment in the progressive development of humanity.' (p. 63) Bernstein calls this a secularised theodicy. Whatever it is, it is frightening and sinister, making of evil a *necessary* moment in the vast movement of history and unfolding of *Geist*. As if that weren't bad enough, this Hegelian approach also suggests that evil might be 'sublated' (*aufgehoben*), or overcome. If you believe that, I have some waterfront property in the Arizona desert I'd like to sell you. Bernstein's criticisms are on the mark; if anything, he understates when he calls Hegel's account 'profoundly unsatisfactory.' (p. 69)

Bernstein much prefers Schelling because, so he insists, Schelling gives evil a real 'reality,' so to speak, an ontological status not granted in the Western theological tradition in which evil is nothing positive (or, in Hannah Arendt's word, 'generative' – this when she shifted from Kant's 'radical evil' to a more Augustinian 'banality of evil'). Evil for Augustine is a privation, a diminution. No grandeur there. Schelling, by contrast, speaks of radical evil as 'unruly, unconscious, chaotic, and always threatening...' (p. 95) That's fine. But he also insists that evil 'that goes to the root,' is grounded in a 'cosmological principle of darkness...' The danger here – one Arendt recognised – is that one grants evil co-equal status with good as a principle of the universe and winds up, perforce, in Manichean dualisms. When Arendt began

to speak of 'the banality of evil,' she described evil as a fungus that spreads itself over the surface of things. But it cannot genuinely go to the root of the matter. (Augustine would add that, were that the case, then God himself – or a god – is wicked and there is nothing to call 'good' about the universe at all.) Surprisingly, coming from a scholar who has written an excellent book on Arendt, Bernstein's rather attenuated discussion of Arendt's controversial arguments is disappointing.

Bernstein continues with lively accounts of Nietzsche and Freud. We find ourselves securely in the realm of modern moral psychology. Nietzsche, Freud, Jonas, Levinas – each is probed for his insights and criticised for his weaknesses. Bernstein claims that Freud recognised there could be no 'final solution' to the 'problem of evil.' (p. 160) Human life is such that evil impulses 'may temporarily be held in check, suppressed, and repressed, but never permanently eliminated.' (p. 160) Now, Bernstein might have noted that this is much closer to Pauline Christianity than to Kant and the post-Kantians precisely because of Freud's recognition that 'good maxims' will not make moral dilemmas go away; there cannot be perpetual peace; and human life is characterised by nothing so much as the transience of moments of beauty and good. Good is inherently fragile, something St. Paul recognised when he confessed: 'That which I would, I do not; that which I would not, that I do,' a brilliant summing up of the divided will. This is a possible corrective to Hegelian overreach and Kantian interiorisation and, it must be said, political naivete. But it goes largely unexplored.

Summing up: Bernstein concludes that 'interrogating' evil is an open-ended process; that there exists a plurality of types of evil; that evil is an excess that resists comprehension; that evil also resists attempts to justify it (here theodicy, he claims, but theodicy doesn't aim to justify – it aims to explain); that the temptation to reify evil must be avoided; that radical evil and banal evil are compatible; that there is no escape from personal responsibility; and, finally, that such responsibility is insufficient – the entire concept must be rethought. This is a counsel of moderation but it lacks real bite, finally. How come?

Let's return for a moment to my earlier criticism of Kant and the back-drop of neo-Protestant 'motive' ethics. One sees the fruits of this will to interiorise all the time nowadays, for example, in complaints that we really should try to 'understand' why terrorists who want to blow us to smithereens hate us so much. Such 'why do they hate us?' laments insist on concentrating on the inner motivations: surely we

ELSHTAIN | Philosophy and Evil

have offended them, somehow. By contrast, a more 'Aristotelian' approach focuses on behavior: let's stop the deeds terrorists do. We don't let a murderer run amuck until we understand why he's done the crime. We stop him and punish him for the deed: there is a dead body that should not be there. We may, of course, look at certain extenuating circumstances. But to therapeutise the enterprise is a distorting business.

A primary function of the state is retributive justice. We don't like the way that sounds. We prefer distributive justice. But you cannot move to 'positive' justice if you haven't got control of the external social environment: you cannot build institutions of law or schools or hospitals if you are in deadly fear of violent attack. Human sociability suffers under such circumstances. We retreat and public life diminishes. *The primary responsibility of the statesperson is to stop the destruction, prevent the attack, and punish those who slaughter the innocent as part of a strategy that marks no distinction whatsoever between combatants and non-combatants.*

You can try to 'understand' what makes a Hitler or Stalin or bin-Laden or Saddam tick all you want. But your job, if you are in a position of responsibility, is to prevent or mitigate their systematic, egregious, and continuing violence – the evil they perpetrate knowingly and with diabolical glee. (Remember the video of bin-Laden laughing over the collapse of the Twin Towers and the deaths of nearly 3000 people?) Ron Rosenbaum wrote a book a few years ago on our ongoing attempts to 'understand' Hitler, from his undescended left testicle – I think it was the left – to his experience of the Western front in World War I, to...well, there is no end. But the overwhelming truth is that he needed to be stopped, whether we 'understood' him or not. The same holds for perpetrators of the notion that all men, women, and children of an entire category of persons – Jews, infidels, Londoners, Americans – should be slaughtered with impunity: this is the face of political evil in our time. It isn't the only phenomenon that warrants the potent term 'evil' but it is the single most important one. The question is not whether to stop it but how best to do it. The psychologising can come later.

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