

Evil without God? A Review of Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Peter Dews commences his excellent and timely book, *The Idea of Evil*, with a defence of the use of the very idea of evil. That this defence is necessary should be clear enough when we consider the recent problematic deployment of the idea of evil, in particular in George W. Bush's phrase the "axis of evil", within the potent political context of the so-called "war on terror". This leads Dews to ask whether such a Manichean idea, with all its antiquated, dangerous, and naively absolutist connotations, has any legitimate role whatsoever within modern pluralistic ethical and political discourses (pp. 1-3). But even if there are problematic uses of the idea of evil, it also seems that we cannot altogether do without the language of evil. To call, for example, what went on in Auschwitz anything less than 'evil', to call it say 'merely wrong' or even 'very, very wrong', is to misconstrue its moral significance. What went on in Auschwitz was not just wrong, it was evil.¹ A large philosophical literature has emerged recently as a result of this dual recognition of the need to defend the use of the language of evil while also dealing conceptually with the problematic nature of that language. Dews' book contributes significantly to this body of literature by deepening our historical understanding of the important role of evil in philosophical thought from Kant to Adorno.²

However, Dews also challenges the attempt, made by much of the recent philosophical literature on evil, to reclaim evil as a purely *secular* term. Dews' book can thus be read in terms of the wider post-secular movement which aims to show that the secular humanist project cannot rest on purely secular foundations. For many Nietzsche's dictum that "God is dead" no longer rings true. But as a consequence we need not so much a return to religion as a move beyond secularism. Dews' point is not merely that many of our moral and political terms, such as progress and sovereignty, have religious origins, a point which is now widely acknowledged.³ Rather the claim is that our secular ethical and political substitutes for religious concepts, such as "the fall" and providence, cannot stand

¹ For a fuller defence of this claim see Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 42, no. 2 (2008).

² Dews book covers similar territory to Richard J Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), and Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³ A point that goes back to at least Hegel but that has been made more recently, and influentially, in Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

on the purely secular foundations we try to give them. And it is the phenomenon of evil, Dews argues, that shows this most clearly.

If Dews' contentions are correct then the cultural, ethical and political comebacks of God and the idea of evil are not unrelated phenomena. The secular humanist project, unadorned with a morally buttressing faith, is a failure that forces us to wallow in triviality and banality. Dews' solution to this problem is a Kantian one. We need to supplement modern naturalism, which is normatively bankrupt, with a rational faith in freedom and God, and perhaps also the immortality of the soul and the progressive purposiveness of the universe (p. 221). Kant's transcendental idealism, and his famous three postulates from the second *Critique*, shows us how to make this marriage work. In effect Dews turns the traditional problem of evil on its head. Rather than using the existence of evil to undermine faith by asking, 'how can you believe in a benevolent and omnipotent God when the world is full of evil', Dews uses it instead to motivate faith by asking, 'how can you live in a world full of evil *without* faith'.

What does Dews understand by the term 'evil'? He reports that the "wide spread intuition" is that evil acts are "wilfully pain-inflicting, destructive and – often – self-destructive enterprises ... driven by [a] force that lies deeper than the familiar repertoire of unappealing human motives, such as greed, lust or naked ambition" (p. 4). On this account, evil acts are harmful ones motivated by extreme and not self-interested motives. While there may indeed be such a widespread intuition, it is not the intuition to base one's understanding of evil on as it cannot account for what Hannah Arendt calls the banality of evil. This is the phenomenon whereby evildoers, like Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, are motivated by little more than a desire to fit in, gain repute in the eyes of their peers and make life easy for themselves, and yet we still judge their acts to be so morally abominable as to count as evil. This would seem to show that extreme and not self-interested motives are not a necessary feature of evil acts. In any case, Dews is probably correct that there is such a widespread intuition, faulty as it may be, and locates the "semantic shift" that underwrites this modern intuition as first reflected in the work of Schopenhauer (p. 133). Prior to this, at least in the German tradition from Kant to Hegel, evil is understood as synonymous with bad or wrongful acts *per se*, so that an evil act is one of prioritising the particular, or the selfish, over the universal. With Schopenhauer we see the modern distinction arising (which, if we read our Aristotle, we soon realise is not so

modern)⁴ between bad acts, which involve the selfish prioritising of the self over the universal, and evil acts, which go beyond merely unjustly pursuing private interests at the expense of others (pp. 132-133). This semantic shift probably occurs due to a greater acceptance of the justified role of selfishness in economic activity for, as Adam Smith famously argues, we rely on the baker's self-interest and not her benevolence for our daily bread. In other words, the associated rise of modern liberalism and capitalism has changed, or at least refined, our very understanding of evil.

Dews' book is framed around the Kantian thesis that morality requires a buttressing faith in the transcendent. As such the book begins and ends with Kant, although the Kant we get (or reconstruct) at the end of the book is one subtly transformed by Dews' encounter with the critiques of Kant made by Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Levinas and Adorno. Dews' engagement with all of these thinkers, with a full or half chapter devoted to each, is original, erudite and philosophically productive. Specialists on any of these thinkers will gain much by simply reading the chapter on their favoured thinker in isolation. But even so, the power and originality of the book is only appreciated by following the thread of Dews' account from start to finish. I shall attempt to sketch the progress of this philosophical narrative below bereft, for brevity's sake, of the richness and depth of Dews' detailed account. However, it is a detailed account that deserves a wide audience and will be appreciated not only by specialists on evil or the various thinkers that Dews examines, but also by anyone interested in the very possibility of a secular ethics, Kantian or otherwise.

Dews' narrative begins with Kant's introduction of a radical split between the practical and the theoretical, between is and ought. This normative gap implies the impossibility of the earthy achievement of our highest good, happiness in proportion to virtue. This threatens to plunge us into existential despair, tear reason apart, and undermine the meaningfulness of our moral projects. To deal with this normative gap Kant argues that, in order to meet the demands of reason, we need to adopt a practical moral faith, which is compatible with our theoretical understanding of the world but not warranted by it, in God and the immortality of the soul. Only through adopting these postulates, from a practical perspective, can we reconcile virtue and happiness, bridge the normative gap, and existentially underwrite our moral projects.

⁴ See Aristotle's distinction between virtue, incontinence (self-interest or giving into normal passions), and wickedness in its various forms, whether 'brutish', 'morbid' or 'wickedness simply' - Aristotle, "Ethica Nicomachea," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), Book VI, Chap. 1 and Book VII, Chap. 5.

Dews then precedes to examine the respective attempts by the great German Idealists, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, to bridge the normative divide set up by Kant by arguing that the practical and the theoretical, subject and object, is and ought, freedom and reality, can and do coincide in this world. The German Idealists all share the intuition that Kant's project needs to be completed by showing how genuine freedom and the achievement of a moral happiness need not be confined to some other world. We need, as Hegel puts it, not merely to *postulate* but "to *experience* the unity of divine and human action" (p. 82). Freedom must not be merely some other-worldly postulate; it must *exist* in this world. Our experience of freedom, from a practical perspective, and of a causally determined world, from a theoretical perspective, must cohere in a deeper unity. For Hegel this reconciliation is achieved, details aside, through recognising the rationality of the ethical life of our community as the embodiment of the unfolding self-consciousness of freedom in world history.

But the Idealists' solutions, despite their breathtaking ingenuity, ultimately fail and fail for reasons, Dews argues, first articulated by Schopenhauer and radically extended by Nietzsche. What makes Schopenhauer such an interesting figure is that he is both "*our* contemporary, as well as being a contemporary of the great German Idealists" (p. 119). He is *our* contemporary, says Dews, because he views the German Idealists' projects as metaphysically extravagant, with their "portentous claims about the 'Absolute'", which amounts to little more than a "disingenuous substitute for overt talk about God" (p. 120). Unfortunately Schopenhauer gets himself caught up not only in his own dubious metaphysics of the will, but also a barren atheism that results in, at best, a "self-denying ascetic life", and at worst, the positive "courting" of "extinction" (p. 134).

Nietzsche extends Schopenhauer's critique of metaphysics by completely wrenching apart the Kantian practical and theoretical in order to throw away the practical and embrace the theoretical in its own right. Freedom, God, immortality and even morality are gleefully rejected in what Nietzsche takes to be a great liberation. However, Dews not only exposes the troubling normative bankruptcy of this solution, but also questions whether Nietzsche even succeeds in his task. Nietzsche's heroic efforts to affirm the world and existence, despite all its sickness, ugliness, evil and meaningless repetition, is part of what Dews sees as his wider "obsession" with redemption (p. 150). We can thereby see Nietzsche as bequeathing us the very modern question: "can we accept the end of transcendence *and* redemption?" (p. 151). Dews thinks not. The enterprise to face the world without also taking up a practical perspective, begun by Schopenhauer and completed by Nietzsche, ultimately fails as it ends in an

existentially self-defeating pit of meaninglessness. To illustrate this point Dews even suggests, with a rhetorical flourish (or excess), that it was "Nietzsche's struggle to face down, without any alleviation, the inflexible necessity of the world's pain and evil, to absorb them into the moment of exaltation, that contributed to driving him mad" (p. 151).

At this stage Dews' narrative undergoes a rupture of its own, as it jumps from Nietzsche to Levinas, a jump that somewhat mirrors that rupture of world history that is Auschwitz. In the shadow of its gas chambers the Hegelian dialectic of justifying the real as rational (p. 221) and the Nietzschean eternal affirmation of the world complete with all its evil (pp. 150-1) are positions that at least come under significant pressure, if not become downright morally untenable. Hegel seems to go wrong by seeing the theoretical as necessarily the actual embodiment of the practical, and Nietzsche seems to go wrong by refusing to take a practical perspective on the theoretical. Both responses arguably lack the conceptual resources to absolutely and unequivocally morally condemn what when on in Auschwitz. After Auschwitz a return to a version of the Kantian distinction between practical and theoretical perspectives seems appropriate.

But first Dews takes us on a detour via Levinas, who radicalises Kant's dualisms. Like Kant, Levinas rejects the necessary concurrence of the real and the rational, being and the good, but unlike Kant, Levinas (at least in his later work) absolutely rejects the possibility of their eventual reconciliation. The theoretical and the practical are torn apart irreconcilably for Levinas. The Good is always otherwise than Being. But if this is so, why act at all? This motivational problem, contends Dews, explains the focus in Levinas' later work on passive suffering, on each of us taking on a Messianic role, rather than the achievement of the good through action in this world. As such, Levinas' emphasis on the impossibility of meeting infinite moral demands, and thereby of making any moral progress whatsoever, "threatens to drain all meaning from the very ethical demand whose unconditional pressure he seeks to disclose" (p. 182).

This leads Dews to consider the post-Auschwitz philosophy of Adorno. For Adorno, the fact that "millions of innocent human beings ... were murdered according to plan ... cannot be dismissed ... as [a mere] deviation from the course of history ... [with its] great tendency towards progress [and], enlightenment" (p. 195). Adorno challenges the traditional enlightenment narrative that praises reason as the organ of progress towards freedom, and instead paints a bleak picture in which instrumental reason is an organ of domination that has resulted not only in Auschwitz but the "administered world" of modernity (p. 192). Despite Adorno's critique of Kantian morality, which Adorno argues dominates nature and

underestimates the difficulties of actualising freedom in an alienating and highly administered modern social world, Dews sees Adorno as adopting a broadly Kantian position. Like Kant, Adorno argues that things are not as they ought to be, and only a "higher form of praxis" can rectify this (p. 231). In the post-Adorno Frankfurt School of Habermas this idea of praxis is redefined in terms of intersubjective, communicative action "in with the strategic dimension, concerted action to change the world for the better," is "integrated with a dialogical dimension" (p. 231). To challenge instrumental rationality and its domination of our humanity we need not irrationality, but a non-instrumental dialogical rationality. Such rationality is the means of bridging the normative gap that Kant exposes.

We return then, after Dews' detour from Fichte to Levinas, back to a Kantian or neo-Kantian position. However, at this point Dews plays his Kantian trump card against neo-Kantian constructivists by arguing that a post-metaphysical secularism cannot sustain the Kantian liberal humanist project it seeks to uphold. This, Dews hopes, is what we have learnt from his long confrontation with evil. Dews makes his case for the existential tension inherent in morality, that only faith can resolve, by making much of Kant's claim in the second *Critique* that happiness and virtue do not coincide in this world. Our own practical reason seems to tear us apart, for as embodied beings we rightly seek happiness, and yet we are also subject to legitimate moral demands that thwart our happiness (p. 58). However, Kant's later work, as Dews briefly notes (p. 161), seems to offer us an alternative vision. This vision is one where through progress and the creation of voluntary cosmopolitan communities, operating within just societies and a peaceful international world order, happiness and virtue can coincide, if not perfectly, then well enough not to undermine our moral efforts. This is a significant shift in Kant's work, because the highest good thereby becomes a 'this-worldly' rather than an 'other-worldly' goal, and one whose achievement requires earthly and not divine hands, although Kant still wonders whether we might not still need God's grace to achieve this.

We can further explicate this picture by drawing on *The Metaphysics of Morals*, a work in which Kant sketches a richer account of the virtuous and just life. In this account of virtue Kant focuses on the two ends that it is a (non-enforceable) duty to have, that of self-perfection and benevolence toward others. We can, at least as I read Kant, think of these two duties as constituting something like a Kantian virtue theory. Just as in standard virtue theory, in which possessing the virtues is seen as constitutive of happiness or human flourishing, we can see that the Kantian agent who is not only just but also virtuous will

likewise be a happy or flourishing agent in this sense. The Kantian virtuous agent will not be stuck in the angst of an unsocial sociability, perpetually competing with others for positional goods and basing her sense of self-worth on her relative material wealth.⁵ She will instead measure her sense of self-worth against the moral law. Such an agent will develop all her capacities, rational, imaginative, artistic and bodily, to their full extent. She will form bonds of friendship with her peers, and develop a sense of well-being through helping others achieve their own conception of happiness. This will require developing the emotional connectivity, sensitivity and maturity needed to fully develop all these virtues.⁶

The Kantian virtuous agent is not some stern, unhappy person who reluctantly, but with a steely will, carries out her cumbersome and self-alienating duties. The virtuous Kantian agent will not only be just and politically committed to enlightenment for all, but she will also develop a life plan built around developing deep bonds of friendship (the perfect mix of respect and love), joyfully achieving the cultivation and self-improvement of all her human faculties, as well as helping others achieve happiness. This hardly sounds dreary. The highest good, flourishing and happiness in (near enough) proportion to virtue, is achievable for many of us in our earthly kingdom precisely because Kantian virtue is *constitutive of* happiness or flourishing. As such, Kant's later work, at least on my reading, significantly undermines the existential tension that Dews builds his case upon by showing that the convergence of happiness and virtue is achievable in this world and without divine assistance.

At this stage we have not necessarily removed the need for an appeal to Kantian transcendental idealism in order to underwrite the moral project, for we still need to account for freedom. However, we can undermine the necessity of the move from the first postulate, freedom, to the second and third postulates, immortality and God. Of course, many Kantians may wish to make the further move of severing Kantian ethics from transcendental idealism altogether, but this leaves them with the difficult task of combining the practical perspective of morality, and the freedom it presupposes, with a theoretical understanding of the world as a causally ordered whole. Dews doubts the viability of this project and mounts some strong arguments to this effect (pp. 214-15), but even if these arguments succeed (and surely this must remain a point of contention), we can

⁵ A point made extensively by Allen Wood in Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶ This final point is defended in detail by Marcia Baron, "Moral Paragons and the Metaphysics of Morals," in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. Graham Bird (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

get by with appealing to transcendent freedom and need not also appeal to God to existentially ground the moral project.

Kant may well be right that we cannot but help, from a practical point of view, to presuppose our freedom when we act in the world. But the same does not seem to be true of God and immortality, at least for many of us. It has often been claimed that Kant's postulates are nothing more than psychologically necessary fictions. I have been arguing that the freedom postulate alone is even that. Certainly Dews must face the predicament that many secularists are able to live perfectly meaningful lives, and have no more difficulty than the rest of us in undertaking and sustaining moral projects, all without recourse to faith in God and a morally purposive world. Dews' response is that the secularist can do so only by failing to face up in a philosophically robust sense to the phenomenon of evil. This response is, however, unconvincing. Indeed, for many it is the confrontation with evils, such as Auschwitz, that undermines their faith in the first place.

However, the secularist is not yet out of the woods as they must still face up to the issues of hope and progress. Perhaps here Dews can locate a practical bulwark for faith resulting from the confrontation with evil. Let us grant Dews' claim that moral action presupposes a narrative of progress, one where the real *can* be made rational. There is thus an element of hope in progress built into the preconditions of action, and were this shown necessarily to be a false hope, this would indeed pose a very serious motivational hurdle to moral action. Can we maintain the hope necessary to sustain action in a morally inhospitable world, scarred by evil, without faith? Can we live and be at home in a world in which we no longer adhere to a teleology in which the good inevitably triumphs over evil? Can we live in a world where we are part of what's wrong, where our very humanity is radically corrupted? These are deep existential questions, and Dews answers them in the negative. I have challenged this move above, and I shall challenge it again from another angle by drawing upon the work of Hannah Arendt.

Certainly no one could accuse Arendt of not thinking deeply about evil. And yet Arendt maintains a love of the world even in the face of evil. We need, Arendt argues, to cultivate and care for the world by sustaining the public sphere through acting in concert with our peers. Such action, sustained by our capacity for natality, our power to begin something new, makes living in the world a worthwhile and meaningful enterprise. Like Adorno, Arendt recognises the difficulty of acting under modern conditions beset by the pressure of social conformism and the bureaucratisation of governance. But even if life lacks

meaning for many of us under modern social conditions, it can be redeemed, it can be saved by earthly action alone. We can overcome the utter banality of sheer existence, and cultivate through action with our peers a world worth living in, a world worth being reconciled to. It is possible and our sheer ability to begin something new can ground this hope.

As Arendt notes, even if the "lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that 'it could happen' in most places", it remains the case that "*it did not happen everywhere*". This Arendt tells us, "humanly speaking," is all that "can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation".⁷ Good might not win, but as long as evil's victory is not absolute, as long as there are pockets of freedom and resistance, as long as we retain some scope for freedom, there is room for hope and there can be redemption in earthly action. Where there is space for freedom there remains not only the danger of regression, but also the space for hope in progress. We need human action and not faith in a transcendent being if we are to live in this world as human beings who can face up honestly to the phenomenon of evil. We might be the problem, as Dewey suggests, but we might also be the solution.

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⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965) 233.