

Reviews

Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), hardback, ISBN 9781405117043, 253 pages, £50.00

Anyone who hopes for a free, just and peaceful world must sooner or later face the awkward question: why does reality seem so recalcitrant to this hope? Why are freedom, peace and justice so hard to bring about? It is not as if human beings have only started to hope for these things, as if the pursuit of freedom, peace and justice – let us say, morality – were just underway. Despite centuries of effort, fulfilment of the hope seems as far away as ever.

The problem becomes all the more acute if one takes morality, or the ability to apprehend and take up the moral point of view, to be the defining mark of the human. If, as many liberal philosophers assume, human beings are by nature rational and reasonable, if they even have no option but to conceive of themselves as autonomous agents beholden to the moral law, why do they persist in acting unreasonably and in ways that fall short of the standards they cannot help but recognize? And if we have so badly failed to realize our humanity in the past, what basis is there for the hope that we shall fare better in the future?

But it is not just longstanding failure to realize our humanity that confronts us: on top of that, there are the feats of inhumanity to contend with. What human beings lack by way of strength to do good they seem to make up for by way of tenacity to do evil. Certainly, they have a demonstrated excellence in moral atrocity. Given a track record that includes the African slave trade, the gulags and Auschwitz, what are the chances that the human race will one day choose morality?

They would appear to be nonexistent unless human beings can somehow turn things around so that morality prevails. In other words, hope for a free, just and peaceful world seems to hinge on the possibility of a transformation of the human spirit, that is, a moral revolution in which an obdurate and apparently deep-seated human propensity to evil is contained and perhaps even transfigured into a source of good. But how can we make sense of such a redemptive transformation? What conception of human subjectivity would its intelligibility presuppose? And if it is not in the end intelligible, would it not be wiser and more honest to give up the radical hope in history – hope that morality will one day prevail – that depends on it?

Peter Dews's excellent but unsettling book probes the answers provided to these questions by Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Levinas and Adorno. The imputation of such concerns to at least some these thinkers will

seem scandalous to some contemporary interpreters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thought – especially of Kant and Hegel. It is not unusual nowadays to talk about German Idealism, for instance, as if the idea of evil, and the religiously indexed problems of redemption and historical hope, had never occurred to it, never mind shaped its development decisively. Not least among the achievements of Dews's book is to correct such bowdlerized interpretations.

Furthermore, Dews succeeds brilliantly in showing that each of his protagonists has interesting and challenging things to say on the subject of evil to anyone willing to listen. There is no tiresome sectarianism getting in the way, no breast-thumping Hegelianism, Nietzscheanism, poststructuralism or whatever on display. While Dews by no means underplays the great differences between his protagonists, these are treated not so much as mutually exclusive options to choose from as occasions for deepening and complicating our understanding.

But hermeneutic generosity runs the risk of edification, and there are times when Dews's protagonists do seem to get off lightly, or at least are not pressed as much as they could be at what look like crucial contestable points.

Here are a few examples. Kant's doctrine of evil sets the benchmark for Dews: the historical narrative of *The Idea of Evil* opens with it but Kant's account remains unsurpassed by the story's close. But for all the rigour and profundity of Kant's theory of evil, it is left standing on a quite fragile base: the notion of intelligible (non-empirical) character. Kant can construe evil as a structural feature of human agency only on account of an original, self-defining repudiation of the moral law for which we are each responsible. This fundamental self-choice conditions and is independent of empirical self-choice and so belongs outside space and time: in the noumenal realm. Dews is rightly worried that this makes moral transformation, of a kind that would deliver us from evil, hard to make sense of philosophically. But the problem surely goes deeper than this, since the concept of intelligible character would seem to make a mystery of the very *genesis* (never mind transformation) of moral subjectivity in the first place.

This did not prevent Schopenhauer from embracing Kant's notion of intelligible character and fanciful ideas of a timeless, unchanging will. As Dews points out, such ideas are hardly conducive to a sober, empirically realistic moral psychology. But the moral psychologies advanced, or presupposed, by some of Dews's other protagonists are just as hard to swallow. This is especially true of Levinas's later work. Whatever normative (or for that matter, metaphysical) view one might take on the idea that suffering is an end in itself, or that the excellence of the subject is to be persecuted by the other and to take unlimited responsibility for that persecution, it is unlikely to feature in our best account of what actually motivates moral and immoral action.

Adorno's approach, as portrayed in the final chapter of Dews's book, is also unsatisfactory in this regard. It assumes, as Dews quotes Adorno, that "society in its present form – and most likely for millennia – is not based, as the ideologi-

cal suggestion made ever since Aristotle would have it, on attraction, but on the pursuit of one's own interest against the interest of all the others". But if either of these suggestions is ideological it is surely not Aristotle's but the image of *Homo economicus* projected here, not least because it "naturalizes" and thereby blinds us to the myriad of social norms that must already be in place for a socialized individual to arrive at a conception of an interest worth pursuing.

The passage just quoted is taken from Adorno's radio talk "Education after Auschwitz". Of course the understanding of evil articulated by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* is also a response to the horrors of the Nazi holocaust. We know that Adorno and Levinas, as witnesses to their times, felt compelled to philosophize in a "non-discursive", "exorbitant", even "demented" mode. But is this kind of response appropriate for us, as witnesses to evil approaching the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century? Dews suggests at the beginning of his book that it is not, and he is critical of the relentless invocation of the Nazi holocaust as the paradigm of evil in contemporary discussions of the subject. But by the end of the book we have returned to it ineluctably again and again, as if Auschwitz must continue to dominate the philosopher's response to evil after all.

The problem of focusing exclusively on one paradigm instance of evil is related to the problem of intelligible character: both freeze evil in time, or rather, they absolutize evil *atemporally*. Of all Dews's protagonists, it is Fichte and Hegel who most promisingly point a way around this impasse. Fichte advocates a developmental moral psychology and Hegel is sensitive to the historical modulations of evil, in particular, the specific tenacity for evil generated in the modern world. These historicizations of evil do not render its wrong any less absolute. Rather, they alert us to the contingency, multiplicity and specificity of its manifestations. An important motivation for Dews's enquiry is to show how religious insights about evil can be rearticulated in more strictly philosophical terms. Fichte and Hegel may lack the resources of a Kant or Schopenhauer, or for that matter a Levinas or Adorno, for recovering the semantic content of one such alleged set of insights – the Judeo-Christian doctrine of original sin – but many readers will consider their accounts no worse for that.

Dews's historical reconstructions are framed by perceptive observations on the current state of philosophy. These contain some withering criticisms of postmodernism and Kantian constructivism, arguably the two predominant philosophical currents in recent years. Because they blithely ignore the metaphysical issues raised by the reality of what Jean Nabert called "the unjustifiable" – that is, as Dews puts it, the occurrence of that which "*absolutely should not have occurred*" – postmodernism and constructivism are unable to sustain, in Dews's well-reasoned view, anything but philosophically hollow talk of hope for the future. Dews's reflections on these issues throughout *The Idea of Evil* show powerfully that we should not settle for that.

Nicholas H. Smith, Macquarie University, Sydney