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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

EVIL

EVIL AND OTHERS

Richard Kearney

Richard Kearney explores the ethics of our encounters with others and asks: How do we know whether the stranger at our door is a person in need or a murderer in disguise, a person to whom we should show hospitality or a person whom we should resist? He argues that we need, on the one hand, to resist prejudices and the temptation to demonize anyone unlike us and, on the other hand, to make informed judgments about good and evil.

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I

ONE OF THE OLDEST CONUNDRUMS of human thought is: *unde malum?* Where does evil come from? What are the origins of evil: human, natural, supernatural? What is the character of evil: sin, suffering, catastrophe, death? Deconstruction cautions against a rush to judgement. While not for a moment denying that evil exists, Derrida and certain other postmodern thinkers counsel vigilance. The tendency of our media society, so prone to hysteria, is to anath-

ematize anything that is unfamiliar as "evil." The other thus becomes the alien, the stranger the scapegoat, the dissenter the devil. And it is this proclivity to demonize alterity as a threat to our collective identity that so easily issues in paranoid fantasies about invading enemies. Any threat to "national security" is met with immediate defense-attack mechanisms. One thinks of McCarthy's blacklists and Reagan's Star Wars, the Soviet show trials and gulags, Mao's cultural revolution and Tiananmen Square, the embargo of Cuba and the mining of Managua, the bombing of Cambodia and the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior, Bloody Sunday and the introduction of internment without trial in Ulster, *Kristallnacht* and Auschwitz, Satilla and Chabrilla, Sarajevo and Kosovo. The list is interminable.

Most nation-states bent on preserving their body politic from alien viruses seek to pathologize and purge their adversaries. Faced with a threatening outsider, the best mode of defense becomes attack. Again and again the national *we* is defined over and against the alien *them.* That's one reason borders exist, with nationals "in" and aliens "out." You can, of course, cross the border with the right passport and become an alien resident (like myself). But to be truly *nationalized,* you need more—not always readily available if you happen to be arriving from beneath the Rio Grande or beyond the Gaza strip. National security draws a *cordon sanitaire* around the nation-state, protecting it from alien trespassers. Like the line drawn in sand at the Alamo. Or the Mason-Dixon line. Or other lines separating north and south—in Vietnam, in Korea, in Lebanon, in Ireland.

It is in the context of such partitioning and polarizing that Derrida has pursued the question of justice and hospitality in recent years. Every nation-state is logocentric to the extent that it excludes those who do not conform (non-a) to its identity logic (a is a). This is necessary up to a point, as even the cosmopolitan Kant recognized when he accepted the need to issue conditions for refugee visitors to

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1 See Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays,* trans. Ted Humphrey (Cambridge: Hackett, 1983).

a state (e.g., that their sojourn be temporary, law-abiding, and non-divisive).[1] The world belongs to everyone, yes, but within the borders of nation-states, it belongs to some more than others. Granted, some form of immigration/emigration laws are inevitable. That's the law and Derrida accepts this; but he goes on to argue that there's something beyond the law: namely, justice. And justice demands more: unconditional hospitality to the alien. Hospitality is only truly just, this argument goes, when it resists the temptation to discriminate between good or evil others, that is, between the hostile enemy (*hostis*) and the benign host (*hostis*).

As we generally understand it, the subject of hospitality is a generous host who decides, as master *chez lui,* whom to invite into his home. But it is precisely because of such sovereign self-possession that the host comes to fear certain others who threaten to invade his house, transforming him from a host into a hostage. The laws of hospitality thus reserve the right of each host to evaluate, select, and choose those he wishes to include or exclude—that is, to discriminate. Such discrimination, indispensable to the "law of hospitality" (*hospitalité en droit*), requires that each visitor identify and name him/herself before entering one's home. And this identification process involves at least some degree of violence.

Absolute hospitality, argues Derrida,

> requires that I open my home and that I give not only to the stranger (furnished with a family name and the social status of a stranger, etc.) but to the absolute other, unknown and anonymous; and that I give place (*donne lieu*), let come, arrive, let him take his place in the place that I offer him, without demanding that he give his name or enter into some reciprocal pact.[2]

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2 Jacques Derrida, *De L'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1997) 29. All translations from the original French are my own.

The other is not just the alien stranger, utterly external to home, family, nation, or state. That would be to relegate the other to absolute exteriority—barbarous, savage, precultural, and prejuridical. No, in order that hospitality be just, we must allow some way for the absolute other to enter our home, family, nation, state.

The difficulty with this analysis of hospitality is not just its difficulty (as deconstructive logic), but that it seems to preclude our need to differentiate between good and evil aliens, between benign and malign strangers, between saints and psychopaths (though admittedly ninety-nine per cent of us fall somewhere between the two). If hospitality is to remain absolutely just and true, all incoming others must remain unidentifiable and undecidable. Derrida appears to claim as much when he declares that

> The newcomer may be good or evil, but if you exclude
> the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy
> your house, if you want to control this and exclude this
> terrible possibility in advance, there is no hospitality....
> The other, like the Messiah, must arrive wherever he or
> she wants.[3]

For Derrida, aliens only come in the dark (like thieves in the night), and we are always in the dark when they come. We are never sure who or what they are; we cannot even be sure if we are hallucinating or not. For the absolute other is without name and without face, an "impossible, unimaginable, un-forseeable, unbelievable, ab-solute surprise."[4] The best we can do is try to read between the lines and make a leap of faith, an impossible leap of faith, like Abraham, like Kierkegaard. But why not add—and here's my difficulty with the

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3 "UCD Round Table, 1997," *Questioning Ethics,* eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1998).

4 John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 73; see also Mark Dooley, "The Politics of Exodus: Derrida, Kierkegaard and Levinas on 'Hospitality,'" *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love,* ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999).

undecidable—"like Jim Jones or David Koresh" or other figures of mystical madness who believe they are recipients of messianic messages from some Other they call God? If all reading is reading in the dark, how can we discern between holy and unholy spirits, how distinguish between the deities of peace and justice and demonic deities of horror and destruction?

To be absolutely hospitable is to suspend all criteria of ethical or juridical discrimination. And in such non-discriminate openness to alterity we find ourselves unable to differentiate between good and evil, which is a fine lesson in tolerance but not necessarily in moral judgement. If there *is* a difference between Jesus and Jim Jones, between Saint Francis and Stalin, between Melena and Mengele, between Siddhartha and the Marquis de Sade—and I think most of us would want to say there is—then some further philosophical reflections are needed to supplement the gesture of hospitality that Derrida proposes. Deconstructive non-judgmentalism needs to be supplemented with a hermeneutics of practical wisdom.

II

Deconstruction is not the only postmodern response to the challenge of evil. While I grant that it is a necessary condition of postmodern wisdom, I do not believe it is a sufficient one. There is also the need for a critical hermeneutics of action. For if deconstruction makes us more intellectually sensitive to the complex and often interchangeable nature of others and aliens, alerting us to the irreducible alterity of all incomers, hermeneutics addresses the need for critically informed ethico-political judgement. It's not enough to be open to the other (though this is essential to ethics); one must also be careful to discern, in some provisional fashion at least, between good and evil.

In an essay entitled, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," Paul Ricoeur offers a hermeneutic critique of different discursive responses to evil: lament and blame, myth, wisdom, and theodicy.[5]

The first discursive response—*lament* and *blame* (witnessed in the Hebrew Bible, for example)—differentiates between evil as suffering and evil as wrongdoing. Lament refers to an evil that befalls us from outside. By contrast, blame refers to evil that arises from within us and for which we are responsible. Or to put it another way, if lament sees us as victims, blame makes culprits of us.[6] The fact is, of course, that these two categories are almost always intertwined. We can feel guilty for committing an evil act while simultaneously experiencing seduction, or invasion, by an overwhelming force outside of us. But for the moment, we'll let the distinction stand.

The next discursive genre—*myth*—allows for the incorporation of evil into "great narratives of origin" (Mircea Eliade). These genealogical narratives seek to explain the origin of evil in terms of the genesis of the cosmos (cosmogony). They offer a "plot" which configures the monstrosity of evil, explaining the source of the obscene and thereby taking some of the shock out of it. Such mythic spectacles make the foreign curiously familiar, the unbearable bearable, the outrageous accessible. In mythological legends, considerations of human moral choice are inextricably linked to cosmological cycles of fate, destiny, or predestination. The evil figure is the alienated figure, that is, a self determined by some force beyond itself.

Myth proceeds towards *wisdom*—our next discursive category—to the extent that we not only recount the origins of evil but also seek to justify why such is the case for each one of us. In short, while myth narrates, wisdom argues.[7] It seeks to address the question not

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5 Paul Ricoeur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Indianapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

6 Ricoeur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," 250.

7 Ricoeur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," 252; see also Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

only of *why* but *why me?* The wisdom genre turns lament into a legal complaint. It tries to make moral sense of the monstrous. An exemplary case here is the book of *Job*, where God and man engage in dialogue about the nature of creation and covenant. With such wisdom literature, the enigma of evil becomes less a matter of metaphysical givenness than of interpersonal relations (human-human or human-divine). In the conclusion to *Job*, arguments about retribution and justice are ultimately turned to a contemplative wisdom of love: Job learns to love Yahweh "for naught" in defiance of Satan's wager at the outset of the story.

Wisdom discourse gives way to "speculative" discourse with the development of Christian theology. Augustine is the first great advocate of this position in his answer to the gnostics. In order to show that evil is not a substance implanted in the universe but a punishment (*poena*) for human sin (*peccatum*), Augustine invents a new category, "nothingness" (*nihil*). Evil is now construed as a deficiency in being which amounts to a privation of goodness (*privatio boni*). If there is evil in the world, therefore, it can only be the result of human action—that is, an act of turning away from the good being of God towards a lack of being. Augustine thus proposes a radically moral vision of evil which replaces the genealogical question, *unde malum?*, with the question of willful human wrongdoing, *unde malum faciamus?* The cause of evil is not to be found in cosmology but in some form of willed action—the sins of the "bad will." This leads in turn, of course, to a penal view of history where no one suffers unjustly. Everyone gets his or her reward, and all pain is a recompense for sin.

The difficulty for Augustine and subsequent theology was how to reconcile this extreme hypothesis of moral evil with the need to give sin a "supraindividual" and historical-generic account in order to explain how suffering is not always justly apportioned as a retribution for individual sins. In countless cases it is clearly excessive. In other words, if evil is something we as humans do, it is also done to us: something we inherit, something already there. Augustine thus sought to reinterpret the *Genesis* tale of original sin in order to ratio-

nalize this apparently irrational paradox: namely, we are responsible but not entirely responsible for the evil we commit or endure.

It was but a short step from these Augustinian speculations on original sin to the fully-fledged theories of Western onto-theology. Thus we find Leibniz, for example, invoking the principle of Sufficient Reason to account for the judicious balancing of good with evil in the "best of all possible worlds." And if this balancing act of retribution and compensation is attributed to the infinite mind of God by Leibniz, it is dialectically humanized by Hegel and the German Idealists. Hegel's "cunning of reason" silences the scandal of suffering by subsuming the tragic into a triumphant logic where all that is real is rational. Here the hubris of systematic speculation reaches its untenable extreme: "The more the system flourishes, the more its victims are marginalized. The success of the system is its failure. Suffering, as what is expressed by the voices of lamentation, is what the system excludes."[8]

But neither version of theodicy—Leibnizian or Hegelian—can provide a convincing answer to the protest of unjust suffering: *why me?* This protest rightly and righteously continues to echo through the memoirs of evil from Job and Gethsemene to Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Nor can theodicy resist the debunking of "rational theology" in part three of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.* Indeed the greatness of Kant was to recognize the need to pass from a purely "theoretical" explanation of evil to a more "practical" one. This move from speculative explanation to moral-political action liberates the insight that evil is something that ought not to be and needs to be struggled against. By de-alienating evil and making it a matter of contingency rather than necessity (cosmogonic, theological, metaphysical, or historical), Kant brought us face to face with the responsibility of action.

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8 Ricoeur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," 257.

The lament of *why? why me? why my beloved child?* remains as troublingly enigmatic as ever. Victims of evil cannot be silenced with either rational explanation (theodicy) or irrational submission (mysticism). Their stories cry out for other responses capable of addressing both the alterity and the humanity of evil. But do such responses exist? How may we acknowledge the enigma of evil, laid bare by our detour through Western genres of thought, while addressing Tolstoy's question: *what is to be done?* Taking a further cue from Ricoeur's hermeneutic reading, I will propose a two-fold approach: practical understanding (*phronesis-mimesis-praxis*) and working-through (*catharsis-Durcharbeitung*).

"Practical understanding" is the name I give to that limited capacity of the human mind to *think* the enigma of evil. I draw here from such varied models as biblical "wisdom," Aristotle's "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*), Kant's "practical reason" (indeterminate judgement), and Ricoeur's "narrative understanding." What each of these models has in common is an ability to transfer the aporia of evil from the sphere of theory (*theoria*) to the sphere of a more practical art of understanding (*techne / praxis*), which allows for an approximative grasp of phenomena: what Aristotle calls "the flexible rule of the architect." Where speculative theory, epitomized by theodicy, explained evil in terms of ultimate causal or creationist origins, practical understanding is geared towards a more hermeneutic comprehension of the indeterminate, contingent, and singular characteristics of evil—while not abandoning all claim to quasi-universal criteria (that would account for at least a minimally shared sense of evil).

Such practical understanding borrows from action the conviction that evil is something that ought not to be and must be struggled against. In that sense, it resists the fatalism of archeologies of evil—mythical and theodical—in favor of a future-oriented praxis. The response (though by no means the solution) offered by practical understanding is to act against evil. Instead of acquiescing in the face of an origin that precedes us, action turns our understanding towards the future "by the idea of a *task* to be accomplished." The moral-political requirement to act does not therefore abandon the

legitimate quest for some minimal model of reasonable discernment; it in fact demands it. For how could we act against evil if we could not identify it, that is, if we could not critically discern between good and evil? In this respect, the genuine struggle against evil presupposes a critical hermeneutic of suspicion. And such hermeneutic understanding retains Kant's insistence on a practical reason that seeks to think somehow the unthinkable. And to do so with the "sobriety of a thinking always careful not to transgress the limits of knowledge."[9]

If practical understanding addresses the action-response to evil, it sometimes neglects the suffering-response. Evil is not just something we struggle against, it is also something we undergo. To ignore this passivity of evil suffered is to ignore the extent to which evil strikes us as shockingly strange and disempowering. It is also to underestimate that irreducible alterity of evil which myth and theodicy tend to overestimate. One of the wisest responses to evil is, on this count, to acknowledge its traumatizing effects and work-them-through (*durcharbeiten*) as best we can. Practical understanding can only redirect us toward action if it has already recognized that an element of alterity almost always attaches to evil, especially when it concerns illness, horror, catastrophe, or death. No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil, we are never prepared enough. That is why the "work of mourning" is so important as a way of not allowing the inhuman nature of suffering to result in a complete "loss of self" (what Freud called "melancholia"). Some kind of catharsis is necessary to prevent the slide into fatalism that all too often issues in despairing self-destruction. The critical detachment brought about by cathartic mourning elicits a wisdom that turns *passive lament* into the possibility of *active complaint*, that is, *protest*.[10]

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9 Ricoeur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," 259.

10 See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth, 1955).

The role played by narrative testimonies is crucial in this respect, whether it be those of survivors of the Holocaust or of trauma-abuse. For such narrative rememberings invite the victim to escape the alienation of evil, that is, to move from a position of mute helplessness to speech-acts of revolt and (where possible) self-renewal. Some kind of narrative working-through is necessary, it seems, for survivors of evil not to feel crippled by guilt (about the death of others and their own survival) nor to succumb to the game of the "expiatory victim." What the catharsis of mourning-narrative allows is that new actions are still possible *in spite of evil suffered.* It detaches us from the obsessional repetitions and repressions of the past and frees us for a future. For only thus can we escape the disabling cycles of retribution, fate, and destiny: cycles which *estrange* us from our power to act by instilling the view that evil is overpoweringly alien—that is, irresistible. Working-through the experience of evil—narratively, practically, cathartically—enables us to take the allure out of evil so that we can begin to distinguish between possible and impossible modes of protest and resistance. Working-through is central to a hermeneutics of action. It makes evil resistible.

In sum, by transforming the alienation and victimization of lament into a moral response of just struggle, the hermeneutics of action offers, I submit, an answer (if not a solution) to the challenge of evil.