

The New Problem of Evil¹

So to my first and longest section: the new problem of evil. Why “new”?

The older ways of talking about evil tended to pose the puzzle as a metaphysical and theological conundrum. If there is a god, and if he is (as classic Jewish, Muslim and Christian theology all claim) a good, wise and supremely powerful god, then why is there such a thing as evil? Even if you're an atheist, you face the problem the other way around: is this world a sick joke, which contains some things that make us think it's a wonderful place and other things which make us think it's an awful place, or what? You could of course refer to this as the problem of good rather than the problem of evil: if the world is the chance assembly of accidental phenomena, why is there so much that we want to praise and celebrate? Why is there beauty, love and laughter?

The problem of evil in its present metaphysical form has been around for at least two-and-a-half centuries. The earthquake that shattered Lisbon on All Saints Day 1755 shattered as well the easy optimism represented by the previous generation. Think of Joseph Addison's great hymn, “The Spacious Firmament on High,” with its repeated affirmation that all who look at the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets are bound to realize that they are the good workmanship of a good creator:

In reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice,
For ever singing as they shine,
"The hand that made us is divine."

We may venture to doubt whether Addison could have written that after 1755 or, if he had, whether anyone would have been quite so willing to sing it. We who have heard of so many further disasters, both natural and man-made, can only perhaps continue to sing it either because we have learned a hard-won natural theology in the teeth of the negative counterevidence or because we have not stopped to think. But my point is that from 1755 on, as Susan Neiman

¹ 1. Wright, N.T. “Evil is still a four-letter word: The New Problem of Evil” in *Evil and the Justice of God*, 19-30. Dowers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

has shown recently in her brilliant book *Evil in Modern Thought*, the history of European philosophy can best be told as the history of people trying to come to terms with evil. Lisbon precipitated the now standard distinction between natural evil (the tidal wave, the earthquake, the hurricane) and moral evil (the gangsters, the terrorists), and that has remained a feature; but the wrestlings of the great enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau, and the massive schemes of Kant and Hegel themselves, can be understood as ways of coping with evil. And when we come further forward to Marx and Nietzsche and to the twentieth-century thinkers (not least Jewish thinkers) who have wrestled with the question of meaning following the Holocaust, we find a continuous thread of philosophical attempts to say what has to be said about the world as a whole and about evil within it.

Unfortunately (in my view) the line of thought which has emerged from this, and which has characterized the popular understanding of the Western world as a whole, and of Britain and the United States perhaps in particular, is very unsatisfactory. I refer to the doctrine of progress, as expounded loftily by Hegel and as we find, in watered-down forms, as a constant in much contemporary thinking. Hegel suggested, more or less, that the world was progressing by means of the dialectical process: first (A), then its opposite (B), then a synthesis of the two (C) and so on. Everything was moving toward a better, fuller, more perfect end; and if there had to be suffering on the way, if there had to be problems as the dialectic unwound, so be it; such things are the broken eggs from which delicious omelets are being made.

This belief in automatic progress, which we find at the same time in poets such as Keats, was in the air in the pantheism of the Romantic movement and in the philosophy of Malthus, which was influential in generating and sustaining the Western belief that Europe and North America were on the leading edge of human development, and that this justified the imperial economic expansion which was such a feature of the nineteenth century. This belief, already well established in the prevailing culture, was given an enormous boost by the popularization of Charles Darwin's research and its application to fields considerably more diverse than the study of birds and mammals on the Galapagos Islands. The heady combination of technological achievement, medical advances, Romantic pantheism, Hegelian progressive idealism and social Darwinism created a climate of thought in which, to this day, a great many people—not least in public life—have lived and moved. In this climate, the fact that we live “in this day and age,” means that certain things are now to be

expected; we envision a steady march toward freedom and justice, conceived often in terms of the slow but sure triumph of Western-style liberal democracy and soft versions of socialism. Not to put too fine a point on it, when people say that certain things are unacceptable “now that we're living in the twenty-first century,” they are appealing to an assumed doctrine of progress—and of progress what's more in a particular direction. We are taught, often by the tone of voice of the media and the politicians rather than by explicit argument, to bow down before this progress. It is unstoppable. Who wants to be left behind, to be behind the times, to be yesterday's people? The colloquial phrase “That's so last-year” has become the ultimate putdown: “progress” (by which we often simply mean a variation in fashion) has become the single most important measuring rod in society and culture.

This belief in progress has received at least three quite different challenges, and it is remarkable that it has survived them all and still flourishes. For many, the First World War destroyed the old liberal idealism. When Karl Barth wrote his first commentary on Romans in 1919, his main message was that it was time to listen for the fresh word of God coming to us from outside instead of relying on the steady advance of the kingdom of God from within the historical process. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a haunting passage in which he considers the possibility that the world might advance toward perfection at the cost of torturing a single innocent child to death, and he concludes that the price is already too high. Auschwitz destroyed, one would have thought forever, the idea that European civilization at least was a place where nobility, virtue and humanizing reason could flourish and abound. The deep roots of the Holocaust in several strands of European thought—not least Hegel himself, who regarded Judaism as a manifestation of the wrong sort of religion—have to be unraveled and deconstructed.

Thus, as I said, it seems remarkable that the belief in progress still survives and triumphs. The nineteenth century thought it had gotten rid of original sin; of course, it had to find replacements, and Marx and Freud offered some, producing explanatory systems and offering solutions to match: new doctrines of redemption which mirror and parody the Christian one. And somehow, despite the horrific battles of Mons and the Somme during World War I, despite Auschwitz and Buchenwald, despite Dostoyevsky and Barth, people still continue to this day to suppose that the world is basically a good place and that its problems are more or less soluble by technology, education, “development” in the sense of “Westernization,” and the application, to more and more regions, of

Western democracy—and, according to taste, of either Western social-democratic ideals or Western capitalism, or indeed a mixture of both.

This state of affairs has led to three things in particular which I see as characterizing the new problem of evil. First, we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result. Let me unpack each of these in turn.

First, we ignore evil except when it hits us in the face. Some philosophers and psychologists have tried to make out that evil is simply the shadow side of good; that it's part of the necessary balance in the world and that we must avoid too much dualism, too much polarization between good and evil. That of course leads straight to Nietzsche's philosophy of power and by that route back to Hitler and Auschwitz. When you pass beyond good and evil, you pass into the realm where might is right, and where anything that reminds you of the old moral values—for instance, a large Jewish community—stands in your way and must be obliterated.

But we don't need to look back sixty years to see this. Western politicians knew perfectly well that Al-Qaeda was a force to be reckoned with; but nobody really wanted to take it too seriously until it was too late. We all know that chronic national debt in many of the poorer countries of the globe is a massive sore on the conscience of the world, but our politicians—even the sympathetic ones—don't really want to take it too seriously because from our point of view the world is ticking on more or less all right, and we don't want to rock the economic boat. We want to trade, to build up our economies. "Choice" is an absolute good for everyone; therefore if we offer both Coca-Cola and Pepsi to starving, AIDS-ridden Africa, exploiting a huge untapped market while adding tooth decay to its other chronic problems, we are furthering its well-being. We all know that sexual licentiousness creates massive unhappiness in families and individual lives, but we live in the twenty-first century, don't we, and we don't want to say that adultery is wrong. (We should perhaps note that only two generations ago many communities regarded adultery the way they now regard pedophilia, which is worrying on both counts.)

I grew up at a time when censorship was being dismantled right, left and center. Censorship, we were told, was the only real obscenity. Whatever people wanted to do or say was basically good; we should celebrate whatever instincts we found inside ourselves; people shouldn't be allowed to control what other people did. Indeed to this day the word *control* is spoken with a sneer, as in the phrase "control freak," as though the basic moral norm was for there to be no

control—just as the basic slogan of large McWorld-type companies is that there should be “no boundaries.” We live in a world where politicians, media pundits, economists and even, alas, some late-blooming liberal theologians speak as if humankind is basically all right, the world is basically all right, and there’s nothing we should make a fuss about.

So then, second, we are surprised by evil when it hits us in the face. We think of small towns as pleasant, safe places and are shocked to the core when two little girls are murdered by someone they obviously knew and trusted. We have no categories to cope with that; but neither do we have categories to cope with the larger renewed evils, with renewed tribalism and genocide in Africa or the renewed “Balkanization” of the Balkans themselves. We like to fool ourselves that the world is basically all right, now that so many countries are either democratic or moving that way and now that globalization has in theory enabled us to do so much, to profit so much, to know so much. Then we are puzzled as well as shocked by the human tidal wave that crashes on our shore, the seemingly endless tragic wall of humanity that comes to Western countries seeking asylum, bringing with it several (though not, we may suppose, more than a small fraction) who are looking not for safety from persecution or tyranny but rather for the secrecy necessary to further their terrorist intentions.

Indeed terrorism itself takes us by surprise, since we have become used to imagining that all serious questions should be settled in a round-table discussion, and we are puzzled that some people still think that doesn’t work, and that they need to use more drastic methods of getting their point across. And ultimately we are shocked again and again by the fact of death. That which our forebears took for granted (having large families because a sudden epidemic could carry off half of them in a few days) is banished from our minds, except in horror stories. Similarly, death is banished from our societies, as fewer and fewer people die in their own homes and beds. And it is banished, too, from our deep-seated societal imagination, as the relentless quest for sexual pleasure and sex, of course, is a way of laughing in the face of death—occupies so much energy and enthusiasm, and dulls the aching reminders that come flooding back with every funeral we see, every murder the television brings into our living rooms. We ignore evil when it doesn’t hit us in the face, and so we are shocked and puzzled when it does.

Third, as a result, we react in immature and dangerous ways. Having decreed that almost all sexual activity is good and right and commendable, we are all the more shrill about the one remaining taboo, pedophilia. It is as though

all the moral indignation which ought to be spread more evenly and thoughtfully across many other spheres of activity has all been funneled on to this one crime. Child abuse is of course stomach-turningly disgusting, but I believe we should beware of the unthinking moralism which is so eager to condemn it simply because we hate the thought of it rather than on properly thought-out grounds. “Morality” like that can be, and often is, manipulated. Lashing out at something you simply know by intuition is wrong may be better than tolerating it. But it is hardly the way to build a stable moral society.

One of the most obvious and worrying instances of this phenomenon was the reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States (and to a degree in the United Kingdom as well). That appalling day rightly provoked horror and anger. But the official response was exactly the kind of knee-jerk, unthinking, immature lashing out which gets us nowhere. Let me not be misunderstood. Thousands of innocent victims met, of course, a tragic, horrible and totally undeserved death. The terrorist actions of Al-Qaeda were and are unmitigatedly evil. But the astonishing naivety which decreed that the United States as a whole was a pure, innocent victim, so that the world could be neatly divided up into evil people (particularly Arabs) and good people (particularly Americans and Israelis), and that the latter had a responsibility now to punish the former, is a large-scale example of what I’m talking about—just as it is immature and naive to suggest the mirror image of this view, namely that the Western world is guilty in all respects, and that all protesters and terrorists are therefore completely justified in what they do. In the same way, to suggest that all who possess guns should be locked up or that everyone should carry guns so that good people can shoot bad ones before they get to their tricks is simply a failure to think deeply about what’s going on. The second-stage horror of the flooding of New Orleans—the violence of those with nothing to lose and the eager buying up of guns by those who wanted to protect themselves and their property—should, but may not, teach us a lesson.

Lashing out at those you perceive to be “evil” in the hope of dealing with the problem—say, dropping copious bombs on Iraq or Afghanistan because of September 11—is in fact the practical counterpart of those philosophical theories that purport to “solve” the problem of evil. Various writers have suggested, for instance, that God allows evil because it creates the special conditions in which virtue can flourish. But the thought that God decided to permit Auschwitz because some heroes would emerge is hardly a solution to the problem. In the same way, the thousands of innocent civilians who died in Iraq

and Afghanistan bear mute testimony to the fact that often such “solutions” simply make the problem worse—and I don’t just mean because they harden and indeed generate opposition. Just as you cannot eliminate evil by act of Congress or by a philosophical argument, so you cannot do so with high explosives.

The immature reactions to evil can perhaps be seen close up if we ask ourselves how we react to evil in our own lives or immediate circumstances. What are you angry about right now? Who has done something which you feel is unjust or unfair? How do you cope with it? How do you come to terms with it? We react so often in one of two ways. We can project evil out on to others, generating a culture of blame: it's always everyone else's fault, it's society's fault, it's the government's fault, and I am an innocent victim. Claiming the status of victim has become the new multicultural sport, as people scramble for the moral high ground in which they can emerge as pure and clean, and everybody else is to blame.

Alternatively, we can project evil onto ourselves and imagine we are to blame for it all. This is one of the normal causes of depression; but the issue is wider than just psychological states. Politically we oscillate between those who tell us that all the ills we face are the fault of someone else - terrorists, asylum-seekers, drug dealers, criminals - and those who tell us, in the classic pop psychology of the 1960s and 1970s, that we are all guilty, that the terrorists are terrorists because of what we’ve allowed to happen in their countries, that the asylum seekers are fleeing the effects of our previous foreign policies, that the drug dealers deal in drugs because we’ve destroyed their other indigenous livelihoods, and that the criminals are the victims of the affluent society. The fact that there is more than a grain of truth in both caricatured sides of the equation doesn’t help. The culture of blaming everyone else (resulting in lawsuits, victim exaltation and self-righteousness) and the culture of blaming oneself (resulting in depression and moral and social paralysis) are likewise immature and inadequate responses to the problem of evil as it presents itself, not so much in our metaphysical discussions as on our streets and television screens. This is the current new problem of evil. We have discovered that evil is still, a four-letter word; but we don’t have a clue what to do with it or about it. And, let me add, ignoring it isn’t an answer either.

I shall discuss a little later the question of how we begin to grow up in our reaction to evil: how we take account of it in every dimension and arrive at a more mature worldview which will allow us to address it more satisfactorily. But

now I want to turn to look at the attempt to address evil, indeed in a sense to base a world-view on it, that we know as “postmodernity.”