

'On Evil' by Terry Eagleton – a book review by Jos Burton

Eagleton opens the book with an insight from the harrowing story of James Bulger, the toddler who was tortured and killed by teenagers Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. Eagleton notes: "A police officer involved in the case of the murdered toddler declared that the moment he clapped eyes on one of the culprits, he knew he was evil.... The point of literally demonising the boys in this way was to wrong-foot the softhearted liberals. It was a preemptive strike against those who might appeal to social conditions in seeking to understand why they did what they did. And such understanding can always bring forgiveness in its wake. Calling an action evil meant that it was beyond comprehension. Evil is unintelligible...."

Eagleton goes on to say: "None of this makes sense, but then that is how it is with evil. The less sense it makes, the more evil it is. Evil has no relations to anything beyond itself, such as a cause" And: "Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil; or they are evil, in which case nothing more can be said about them. The argument of this book is that neither of these viewpoints is true."

Eagleton then gives a series of examples, mostly literary: from Macbeth to Brighton Rock – where he explores the representations of evil characters and evil deeds, as they occur in fiction, to explore the relationship between the two. Are people evil because of the evil things they do – or do they commit evil acts because they are evil people?

In the example of Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) – a heavily loaded fable of "the darkness of men's hearts" – Eagleton suggests this is concerned with what is traditionally known as original sin and the biblical myth of the Fall. How the shipwrecked schoolboys' behaviour descends into violence and sectarianism - despite their attempts to remain civilised...

Interestingly, when a real group of schoolboys were actually marooned on a desert island for 15 months in 1965 – the reality was very different from the fiction: the boys survived through planned and intentional cooperation. So, what does this say about Golding's view of human nature (he famously said: Man produces evil as a bee produces honey) and indeed, the worldwide success and popularity of the *Lord of the Flies* itself (it was on the school syllabus for many, many years!)? – Was it that in the post-war, post-Holocaust years, the story played into our conception of civilisation as merely a thin veneer and that people naturally revert to cruelty, savagery and evil?

What does Eagleton mean by the term 'evil'? As has been noted in the other book reviews – one of the sticking points of the book is Eagleton's use of the terms: evil, wickedness and sin. Maybe a leftover from his own Catholic upbringing(?) there are passages in the book where he uses all three terms interchangeably and equally, he goes to some pains (and fails) to adequately articulate a difference between the terms ie: whilst Hitler is most definitely evil, Stalin and Mao are, apparently, 'merely'

wicked – presumably because the latter committed their atrocities for a cause, and Hitler did them because he could?

Towards the end of the book Eagleton returns to the Nazis...

“If evil requires a human subject, however, what about the Nazis? Whose subjective state of being led to Auschwitz? Hitler's? The whole of the party vanguard? The national psyche? These are not easy questions to answer. Perhaps the best we can venture is that evil in Nazi Germany, as in similar situations, worked at very different levels. There were those on the ground who conspired in an evil project not because they themselves were evil, but because as members of the armed forces or other minor functionaries they felt compelled to do so. There were others who eagerly took part in the project (thugs, patriots, casual anti-Semites and the like) and who were therefore more culpable, but who could hardly be described as evil. There were also those who committed unspeakably atrocious deeds, but not because they reaped any particular gratification from doing so. Eichmann may well fall into this category. And then there were those, presumably like Hitler himself, who indulged in fantasies of annihilation, and who can probably be spoken of as authentically evil. Perhaps one can also speak tentatively of a national psyche of fantasies which gripped and infected those who did not concoct them themselves, to the point where they, too, were afflicted through Nazi propaganda...”

Eagleton acknowledges that the concept of evil is multifaceted and complex, encompassing both moral and religious dimensions. He criticizes simplistic understandings of evil that reduce it to a mere absence of good or a personal flaw, arguing that such reductionist views fail to grasp its deeper implications.

Eagleton emphasizes that evil is not an external force or an inherent quality but rather a result of human actions and societal structures. He views evil as intimately tied to social, economic, and political systems, arguing that it often arises from the inequalities, injustices, and power imbalances prevalent in society.

Furthermore, when Eagleton examines the relationship between evil and ideology, he suggests that ideologies can be instrumental in justifying and perpetuating evil acts (e.g. terrorist groups), as they provide the framework and rhetoric through which individuals and societies rationalise their actions.

This is what ChatGPT gives when asked what philosophers have thought about the subject of evil:

1. Ancient Greek Philosophy:

- Plato considered evil as ignorance or a lack of knowledge. According to him, people commit evil acts due to their ignorance of what is truly good.
- Aristotle viewed evil as a result of imbalances or extremes in behaviour. He believed that evil arises from the failure to find the mean between two extremes.

2. Medieval Philosophy:

- Augustine emphasized the moral and religious aspects of evil. He argued that evil stems from the misuse of human free will and the absence of God's grace.
- Aquinas built upon Augustine's ideas and discussed evil as a privation or a lack of goodness. He proposed that evil is not an entity in itself but rather a deficiency or distortion of what is good.

3. Enlightenment and Modern Philosophy:

- Kant focused on moral evil, considering it as a violation of moral duties and the categorical imperative. Evil actions, according to Kant, stem from a will that prioritizes self-interest over moral principles.
- Nietzsche challenged traditional moral frameworks and considered the concept of evil as a product of human constructs. He believed that moral judgments, including labelling actions as evil, are subjective and contingent upon cultural and historical contexts.

4. Existentialism:

- Sartre explored the existentialist perspective on evil, suggesting that it arises from human freedom and choice. Evil actions, for Sartre, result from individuals acting in bad faith or denying their freedom and responsibility.
- De Beauvoir examined the ways in which societal structures and gender norms contribute to oppression and evil acts. She highlighted the importance of recognizing and challenging oppressive systems.

5. Postmodernism:

- Foucault analysed the relationship between power and knowledge and how they shape social institutions. He discussed the concept of "disciplinary power" that operates through systems such as prisons, schools, and hospitals, which can produce evil effects.
- Judith Butler drawing on poststructuralist and feminist theories, explored the notion of evil in relation to violence and the performativity of gender. She examined how social norms and power structures can lead to oppressive and harmful acts.