

---

# Book Reviews

---

*Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation.* By Richard J. Bernstein. Cambridge: Polity, 2002. ISBN 0-7456-2954-7. Pp. 304.

*Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness.* By Richard Kearney. New York: Routledge, 2003. ISBN 0-415-27258-0. Pp. 304.

---

“The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe” (1). Richard J. Bernstein thus opens his book *Radical Evil* with a statement by Hannah Arendt. The book’s title evokes Immanuel Kant’s *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (1793), and Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968). These form the dialectical poles for *Radical Evil*, in which the philosophical pursuit for the *radix* of evil finds itself in tension with the experience of extreme evil. As ‘A Philosophical Interrogation’, Bernstein sets out to survey eight figures from modern philosophy in order to negotiate a critical account of evil, one he finds is done inadequately as a ‘problem’ within a specific discourse, a test of a system’s integrative powers, something to be ignored as ‘religious’, or a pitfall toward ‘vulgar Manichaeism’.

According to Bernstein, it would be anachronistic to expect philosophy to have anticipated the extreme evils of the twentieth century that have ruptured the legitimacy of its accounts, but now it must gain better understandings of them (particularly as totalitarian solutions have survived the fall of their regimes). Thus Bernstein sets out to regain that legitimacy by “sorting out just what we take to be insightful, misleading, and even false accounts of evil” (7). He sides with Arendt’s interpretation of ‘radical evil’, as the interrogations are guided by the notion that, “There is something brute, unsurpassable, and “transcendent” about evil, which challenges and defies philosophical concepts and categories” (203). So, rather than establish a general theory, he develops a diverse set of complimentary philosophical perspectives from ethics, hermeneutics, moral psychology and phenomenology. These form ten theses on ‘what we have learned’ in Bernstein’s conclusion.

This procedure may challenge the typical philosophical route to legitimacy, namely that of providing ‘knock-down arguments’ and grounds for certainty. The popular route to legitimacy, via easy accessibility and comprehension, is also limited since mature undergraduate philosophy reading skills are necessary to understand the details of the book. That said, as a teaching resource, such students found it useful in providing the key terms, frameworks and questions by which they could investigate their primary texts. Bernstein’s interrogations thus provide many helpful openings, rather than comfortable closures.

A lengthy essay on Kant’s *Religion* and an essay defining Arendt’s ‘radical evil’ and ‘the banality of evil’ bookend the other chapters on Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas, and Jonas. After a brief introduction to the terms and frameworks in their thought pertinent to the question, each philosopher is asked what is meant by ‘evil’. This provides an opportunity for Bernstein to find them at war with their own categories, possessed by ambiguities, in agon with a predecessor, or struggling to articulate what philosophy has either failed to or cannot thematize. This works in order to have each figure ‘speak’ of how their conclusions can assist one’s thinking about evil; framed by Bernstein as open-ended rather than systematic. Bernstein demonstrates his knowledge of each philosopher, as well as historic or current debates in secondary literature, without deviating from his interrogation’s goals. For example, Bernstein reads “Hegel against Hegel” to describe a task (*Aufgabe*) of confronting evil (74). This task is the struggle that the human condition, as historically situated, has wounds that leave permanent scars. One cannot refuse that evil is fundamental and ineradicable, but evil must be refused as it presents itself.

In the background of Bernstein’s interrogation, there is a theme not explicitly stated in his introduction. The chapters and the conclusion comment upon the import of the interrogation’s findings for understanding the human condition. Enroute, Bernstein develops a contemporary moral subject that undergoes several forms of (A) formal responsibility for his or her deeds, and (B) substantive responsibility for the sufferings and future life conditions of beings beyond itself. Bernstein finds that it is impossible to totally explain the exercise of these responsibilities, and implicitly argues that they form the universal experience of the post-twentieth century human condition.

Bernstein finds from Kant, Schelling, Freud, and Arendt that (A) formal responsibility must be a rigorous demand of every person, even though the ultimate causal constraints on the subjective ground for willing are not explainable. This is described by Kant in the opening chapter, and from there onwards as inscrutable (*unerforschlich*; 45, 93, 155, 223). Bernstein finds that this is the core of spontaneity essential to being human, thematized by Arendt’s concept of ‘natality’ as the capacity to begin something new (267). Spontaneous

nality is the incalculability that philosophy struggles to account for, and totalitarian solutions seek to eliminate. Likewise (B) substantive responsibility infinitely (181, 194) imposes itself from beyond the person, established as immanent since Nietzsche (113), as a necessary struggle to resist moral nihilism. Jonas gives this form as the 'new categorical imperative': "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" (192). Levinas describes how the human condition is an ethical imperative (179) to reject one's preference for existence as (Heidegger's) 'law of being' and *conatus essendi*, to ethical priority for response to one's neighbour (*l'autrui*; 171). Again, philosophy struggles with these sources of the moral and juridical person where totalitarianism seeks to overcome them in corrupting human solidarity.

By this description, the grounds for these responsibilities form a more primordial heteronomy under which the moral subject must nevertheless act as if autonomous and intentional. This forms a contradictory situation. The sources that actualize the capacities for which Bernstein's moral subjectivity is responsible are outside a rigorous limit he (with Kant and Arendt) argues is necessary to maintain culpability: to each their own, with no excuse for moral failure. It seems that upholding this contradiction is the safeguard against the adoption of totalitarianism or its methods that is breached by the temptation for a particular self-will to impose itself upon others by claiming (even a limited) universality. This contradiction is that which Bernstein finds Kant at war with himself (35): if responsibility is actualized in experience by what resists philosophical thematization, then how can one avoid positing its form as a dialectical illusion? Bernstein finds intellectual integrity in Kant's *Religion* for postulating this implication as the basis for a more general claim of radical freedom for the human condition (44, 233). Bernstein argues that from there it is possible to continue "the desire to know, to understand, to comprehend the evil we confront... [and] to respond to its manifestations" (228). He demonstrates this hermeneutical open-endedness by interrogating prejudgements for a deeper understanding about evil. Yet while Bernstein may help provide means to sort out what are insightful or misleading accounts of evil, the possibility of garnering legitimacy for it may be compromised by the rigorous and unfinished moral subjectivity that he demands.

Richard Kearney gives one answer to this question with *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*. He argues that insofar as the human condition's minimal quotient of self-identity is narratively based (79), one constructs all else from this by nature of being intrinsically hermeneutic (231). For Kearney, to develop this sense of self is a rigorous task of orientation and understanding in a world with no clear determinations, where "[t]he shortest route from self to self is always through the other" (189). This task is not short, as only finished when there is no more possibility of it being unfinished. In brief, the route Kearney advocates is

storytelling. Rightly formed storytelling enables judgement, as the narrative understanding of a diacritical hermeneutics of discernment, that can discern between benign and malign others. This practise arrests the impulse to practise a 'vulgar manichaeism' that equivocates the seemingly alien with evil. If one reads this book in combination with viewing Tim Burton's film *Big Fish*, the questions of popular and philosophical legitimacy put to Bernstein may well be redressed.

The book offers itself in two parts. The first part is very accessible, demonstrating that the human identity is necessarily an unfinished thing, since selfhood and strangeness share an equiprimordial status. The volume's title gives the three colloquial names for this experience. Kearney shows (*monstrare*) and warns (*monere*) of the monstrous historical consequences of the attempt to overcome the limits of the exterior self-same invoked by individuals, societies and philosophy. He includes genealogies of monsters, scapegoats and evil, overviews of the sublime, monstrous and terror, the postmodern imaginary of the Real, and dramatic reappearitions of these in cinema. In so doing, Kearney demonstrates how a hermeneutic of pardon without judgmentalism or decisionism depathologizes the "monstrous into monsters, of monsters into enemies, of enemies into strangers, and eventually of strangers into ourselves understood as strangers-to-ourselves" 240, n.12). The second part requires a philosophical background, critically reviewing philosophers' reflections (Derrida, Levinas, Kristeva, Zizek, Caputo, Lyotard, Heidegger) as they question alterity and the stranger in terms of concepts that defy reason and the limits of understanding (the ghost/*revenant*, melancholy, the immemorial, *Khora*, and God).

As with Bernstein, Kearney finds the questions of evil and alterity incumbent over the Western collective conscience. His review of certain philosophical responses finds an interpretation of extreme binarisms. Despite many postmodern's claims to undermine dualism he finds fixed oppositions, e.g. alterity/consciousness, silence/speech, ineffability/representation, with preference for the former. Contend this predetermines what is initially presented as undecidable and obscures that some relation must remain, Kearney constructs an ethical imperative that the purism of silence should bow to the exigency of peace (181) unless one prefers Heidegger's extreme quietism that renders the *sensus communis* a "dark unpeopled scenario of endless passivity" (220). That one cannot escape the hermeneutical circle does not remove the possibility of human response (102).

Kearney's response is to articulate a way between the extremes (*metaxy*, *mi-lieu*), "[a] path which enables us to walk at sea level, charting a careful itinerary between the bipolar swings of cognitive binarism" (187). The metaxological approach to radical evil is a threefold task of practical understanding, working-through, and pardon. This is a practise, embodying critical hermeneutics in 'real life', of saying what remains unsayable. This interrupts the silence that blocks

conversion of the monstrous and forces others to become foils for an unthinking scapegoating of strangeness (77). "It is this... *ethical* capacity of the narrative imagination which renders it all the more fitting to testimonial rememberings of the Holocaust and other historical horrors" (182). Philosophy thus needs hermeneutics to move from *theoria* to ethical action.

Throughout the volume Kearney refers to companion volumes, *The God Who May Be: A New Hermeneutics of Religion* (2001) and *On Stories* (2001). He also frequently provides appendices to the chapters to review the background for his arguments. Amid these emerges a larger project of elaborating upon the 'possible God' (208) as a "loving may-be" (227) of an eschatological Kingdom of God 'beyond Being' that does not passively wait (228). In this way, the closing two chapters seem diverted from the other chapters' advocacy for philosophical movement from *theoria* towards action. The depathologizing of aliens that should have culminated with 'ourselves', instead concludes with God. Kearney recommends "I *am* here" is the ethical response to the 'de-foiled' other's call "where are you?" (228), since silence would be evil. Perhaps Kearney takes his cue from Kant's citation of Luke 17: 21-22 at the close of *Religion*, "For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you!"

Richard J. Bernstein is the Vera List Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York. Among his many recent contributions to journals, dictionaries and compilations, *Radical Evil* is significantly preceded by *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in Pragmatic Mode* (1986), *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (1991), as well as investigations of Arendt (1996) and Freud (1998).

Richard Kearney is the Professor of Philosophy at Boston College and University College Dublin. Aside from the trilogy mentioned above, he provides great insight to contemporary philosophy through *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984), *Poetics of Modernity* (1995), and *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (1998).

Nathan Loewen

McGill University