

CT REVIEW

BOOKS, MOVIES,
MUSIC, AND
THE ARTS



JONATHAN BARTLETT

Tragic Humanism

Terry Eagleton argues that evil is not as mysterious or as explainable as we think. By Christopher Benson

Eagleton's *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, argues against two prevailing viewpoints: "Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil; or they are evil, in which case there is nothing more to be said about them." The first viewpoint besets our sanguine politicians, journalists, and social scientists who tend to explain away evil, while the second besets our dour theologians and ministers who invoke "evil" as a conversation stopper. Evil—like God—is neither fully comprehensible nor unfathomable, but partially explainable. Eagleton insists that our explanations of evil may sharpen or soften moral judgment.

Informed by the Marxist accent on class society and the Christian accent on original sin, Eagleton articulates a vision he calls "tragic humanism," which is honest enough to reckon with the brokenness of life, but hopeful enough to affirm the possibility of deep-seated transformation. "Soft-hearted liberals and tough-minded Marxists" need to hear Eagleton because he dares to name individuals and acts "evil," which they regard as an archaic category that has gone the way of the horse-drawn carriage. Otherworldly Christians also need to hear him because he confronts them with the material effects of evil (famine, nuclear weapons, financial malfeasance), which they miss because of their focus on "the spiritual forces of evil" (Eph. 6:12).

If social conditions are solely responsible for evil actions, we are puppets. If human behavior is solely responsible, we are monsters. And if the autonomous will of an individual solely chooses evil actions, we are like "the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with his 'Evil, be thou my good!'" Against all these dehumanizing responses that move us beyond good and evil, where we are not answerable for our actions, Eagleton contends for an interplay between environment and character, as there is "no absolute distinction between

Two events happened this spring in New York City that flummoxed our sophisticated pundits.

First, a naturalized citizen failed to detonate a car bomb in Times Square. Why did Faisal Shahzad become a jihadist? Explanations included revenge for drone attacks in Pakistan, misery over the foreclosure of his home, rage against George W. Bush, Islamist hatred for infidels, and anger at the creators of *South Park*, a TV show that depicted Muhammad.

Second, after helping an assaulted woman, a homeless immigrant was stabbed in Queens and left for over an hour as dozens of passersby ignored him. A surveillance camera captured the whole scene. When firefighters

arrived, Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax was dead. Why were there no Good Samaritans? Explanations included bystander apathy, diffusion of responsibility, and desensitization to violence.

The pundits were reluctant to acknowledge the obvious presence of evil in both events, owing to our thin moral discourse and metaphysical uncertainties. Thankfully, British literary critic Terry Eagleton is alert: "We know nothing any more of choirs of heavenly hosts, but we know about Auschwitz. . . . Perhaps evil is all that now keeps warm the space where God used to be."

On Evil (Yale University Press) ★★★★★, a superlative follow-up to



being influenced and being free.”

On Evil belongs to the genre of religious psychology, where Eagleton brilliantly relates the ultimate concerns of the theologian with the penultimate concerns of the psychoanalyst. Without the former, the result would be a study of human discontent; without the latter, a retreat into papier-mâché piety. Here, Aquinas meets Freud—enriching our reflections on the nature and manifestations of evil.

EVERYDAY DOGMA

This short book comprises three chapters. In “Fictions of Evil,” Eagleton, a Roman Catholic, turns to the modern novels of William Golding, Flann O’Brien, Graham Greene, and Thomas Mann, and develops unconventional expressions of doctrine that might not get the seal of approval from Pope Benedict. For example, he says that “original sin is not the legacy of our first parents but of our parents, who in turn inherited it from their own. The past is what we are made of. Throngs of ghostly ancestors lurk within our most casual gestures, preprogramming our desires and flicking our actions mischievously awry.” Risking a change in the substance of orthodoxy, the author performs the work of a glassblower, expanding the molten glass of dogma beyond its familiar shape until

On Evil belongs to the genre of religious psychology, where Eagleton brilliantly relates the ultimate concerns of the theologian with the penultimate concerns of the psychoanalyst.

greater illumination is achieved.

The second chapter, “Obscene Enjoyment,” opens with perceptive interpretations of evil in Shakespeare’s dramas. Where the three witches of *Macbeth* subvert human speech, sexual identity, and social order, Iago, the villain of *Othello*, itches to deface the virtue and beauty of the married couple because they threaten his own sense of nothingness. These villains are anti-creators, exercising a negative freedom to destroy. “Given the intolerable fact that things do exist,” Eagleton observes, “the best evil can do is try to annihilate them. In this way, it can seek to get on terms with God by inverting his act of creation, in a grisly parody of the Book of Genesis.”

The rest of the chapter explores key questions with the aid of philosophy, theology, and 20th-century political history. Is evil positive or privative? Purposeful or pointless? Rare or common? Glamorous or boring?

Internal or external? Is “radical evil”—willing wickedness for its own sake—even possible? Do not expect neat and tidy answers, because evil is a conundrum.

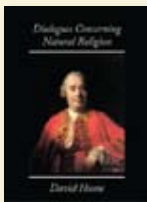
The highlight of this chapter is the application of Freud’s death drive to the alcoholic, whose addiction—like evil—reveals that pleasure and self-violence are inseparable. If the scandal of psychoanalysis is “the proposal that human beings unconsciously desire their own destruction,” then the scandal of the gospel, according to Aquinas, is the proposal that the Divine Physician cares for the sick more than the sick care for themselves (Matt. 9:12).

LOVING ‘FOR NAUGHT’

“Job’s Comforters,” the final chapter, concerns theodicy—the attempt to “justify the ways of God to man.” “Modern attempts to explain evil really stem from the cosmic optimism of the Enlightenment,” Eagleton

MY TOP 5 BOOKS ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

By John Stackhouse, author of *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (InterVarsity Press)



DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION

DAVID HUME (HACKETT)

This is the classic philosophical assault on the idea of God being all-good, all-wise, and all-powerful. If a book can answer Hume, it can answer most skeptics today. If it doesn’t try to answer Hume, move on to one that does.



THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY (PENGUIN CLASSICS)

Why does God allow evil, particularly atrocities? No book more effectively punctures philosophical and theological abstractions with the sharp end of real life.



THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

C. S. LEWIS (HARPERONE)

Lewis’s classic is still the most wide-ranging, accessible, and cogent response to the problem of evil. Don’t let its analytical tone make you forget, as many do, that its author lost his mother in childhood and fought on the frontlines of the First World War.



A GRIEF OBSERVED

C. S. LEWIS (HARPERONE)

This *cri de coeur* (“cry from the heart”), rivaled by Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son*, keeps any intellectual response to evil appropriately modest. Ideas are good; prayers, even angry ones, are better.



GOD, FREEDOM, AND EVIL

ALVIN PLANTINGA (EERDMANS)

The most accessible statement of Plantinga’s Free Will Defense, this argument revolutionized the modern philosophical discussion and helped make Christian thinking plausible in the broader academy.

claims. “Evil is the dark shadow that the light of Reason cannot banish. It is the joker in the cosmic pack, the grit in the oyster, the out-of-place factor in a tidy world.” The Boy Scout argument (evil builds our moral character), the Best of All Possible Worlds argument, the Big Picture argument (“evil is not really evil, just good that we fail to recognize as such”), and the Free Will argument are all incisively critiqued. Bottom line: Theodicies downsize an un-downsizable God and diminish the evilness of evil.

When confronted with evil, we should remember God’s approach with Job in Egleton’s cheeky paraphrase:

Far from offering Job an account of why he has allowed him to suffer, he more or less tells him to go to hell. What can you possibly know about me? is the brunt of his testy intervention. How dare you imagine that you can apply your moral and rational codes to me? Isn’t this like a snail trying to second-guess a scientist? . . . In the end, Job decides to love God for “naught”—to love him without regard for merits or demerits, reward or retribution, with a love as gratuitous as the scourges he has endured.

In a near perfect book—perfect for its profundity and panache—there are imperfections: its insufficient treatment of the relationship between sin and evil; its agnosticism about whether the origins of evil are supernatural or natural; and its mistaken claim that “most wickedness is institutional . . . the result of vested interests and anonymous processes, not of the malign acts of individuals.” Closer engagement with the Bible’s portrayals of evil would have helped.

On Evil leaves the reader with at least two major takeaways. First, evil refuses creaturely limits, which explains the ambition for godlike power in the Garden of Eden, the zeal for racial purity in the Nazis’ Final Solution, and the tireless drive for profit in the American Dream. Second, evil wears many faces—creative and destructive, delightful and deadly, primitive and progressive, clinical and chaotic, idealistic and cynical—to conceal its utter vacancy. ☩

Christopher Benson is a humanities instructor and book reviewer in Denver.

A Gifting Child

Emily Colson says ‘no one remains neutral’ about her autistic son. By Amy Julia Becker

Early on in Emily Colson’s memoir about raising her son—**Dancing with Max: A Mother and Son Who Broke Free** (Zondervan) ★★★★★—she writes, “Max is not a burden; he is my greatest gift.” This autistic child, who cried most hours of the day as an infant, had long tantrums as a boy, and now has trouble forming words as a young man—surely this child is a burden. But he’s not. Max, now 19, is a gift, not only according to his mother but to all of us who are invited into his story.

Colson believes Max “brings out the best and worst in humanity, from the rudest of remarks to the most genuine acts of selflessness. No one remains neutral.” For instance, Colson recounts the breakdown of her marriage when Max was only 18 months old. Although the father later formed a strong relationship with his son, it appears that the intensity of Max’s early needs wedged the couple apart.

Parallel to this breakdown is Colson’s growing relationship with her father, Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship. Charles’s words in the prologue and epilogue, in which he writes about a relationship that has taught him humility, joy, and love, serve to bracket his daughter’s.

Emily Colson implies throughout that people’s reactions to Max are a matter of perspective. For instance, when Max was in a public school, one teacher said, “I can’t see him writing his whole last name. Are we really going to spend the entire year trying to teach him to write the first letter of his last name?” A few

months later, with Max in a new school, Colson approaches the new teacher timidly, saying, “I think he’s going to write.” The teacher responds, “Well, that’s great. Because *I know* he’s going to write.”

Members of Colson’s community respond to Max, from calling him “retard” to forming a baseball team for kids

with special needs. Indeed, no one remains neutral.

Max brings out the best in the body of Christ, although one instance of confused charity comes after Max, who had become unruly at a church party, is removed from the room by his mother. She sits with him, alone, for an hour and a half. When she overhears the guests say, “Emily is so filled with grace,” she responds, “I didn’t need velvet-covered clichés. I needed love and comfort. I needed help.”

Colson laces her memoir with anecdotes about Max’s baptism, his prayers, and his visits to see prisoners with his grandfather. His autism makes it nearly impossible for him to sit through a service, so the Colsons come only for the closing songs, after which Max helps clean up the sanctuary. “Church isn’t over until Max dances at the back door,” their pastor says.

Colson sees God’s hand in Max’s autism. For instance, she refuses to partake in a seminar for parents called “Grieving the Dream,” because, she says, “I don’t think this diagnosis steals our dreams. What if it were the very thing to build our character, to give our lives purpose?”

Similarly, her father writes, “Could it be that . . . some people are not as affected by the Fall as others?” He wonders if Max offers “a glimpse of what God intended for his original creation.”

Dancing with Max does not ask deep theological questions. It offers few clinical details about autism. It doesn’t need to. The memoir is a love story written from a grandfather to

a daughter to a son. Through tantrums and joyful connections, we come to understand what Emily and her father mean when they say Max is a gift. ☩

Amy Julia Becker is a contributor to the *CT* women’s blog and author of a forthcoming book about her daughter with Down syndrome.

