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# The Postmodern Eclipse of Evil — Be Advised . . . and Be Afraid

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One of the most harrowing features of modern thought is the reluctance to speak honestly about evil. The cause of this discomfort with the category of evil is understandable, of course. When belief in God recedes, confidence in moral judgment inevitably recedes with that belief.

This is brought to life in the pages of *The New York Times Magazine* in the form of a film review. The film is a documentary about the French lawyer Jacques Verges — a man who has defended some of the worst criminals in France, including Klaus Barbie and Carlos “the Jackal.” He also had long friendships with murderous dictators such as Cambodia’s Pol Pot and China’s Chairman Mao.

Reviewer Daphne Merkin seems to understand the difficulty posed by the film and its subject:

*What does evil — a term that came into general use only in the 15th century, originally referring to the overstepping of proper limits — look like these days, when so many of us are wary of reductive terms, unsure of our own convictions and easily persuaded of the moral relativism of our values? (The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word is “little used in modern colloquial English.”) Does it have a particular smell, like teen spirit? Does it come wearing a hood, as in the movies? Or, again, does it look like you and me, sitting over dinner and enjoying a glass of vintage Bordeaux?*

The syndrome cited here — a reluctance to use “reductive terms” — reflects the moral discomfort and uncertainty of the age. How do we come to terms with humanity without using the word “evil” and meaning it?

Merkin continues:

*For much of history, when an ironclad trust in a divine maker still prevailed (however many plagues or earthquakes he might have arranged), the question of “evil” was contained by one of two rationales: that people deserved it because of wicked behavior or that it was part of a larger, unknowable celestial plan. That attitude, gullible as it now seems, had the benefit of keeping this particular epistemological dilemma outside the human purview. It held steady until the emergence of a philosophical tradition that, beginning with Immanuel Kant’s questioning of God’s pivotal position and reaching an apogee of unbelief with the arrival of Nietzsche, put the concept of evil right in our laps. As Susan Neiman says in “Evil in Modern Thought,” from the Enlightenment on there have been two views: “The one, from Rousseau to Arendt, insists that morality demands that we make evil intelligible. The other, from Voltaire to Jean Améry, insists that morality demands that we don’t.”*

That is a succinct, if reductionistic, explanation for what happened. The great philosophical turn was away from a fixed understanding of evil as an objective concept and toward evil (and all moral judgment) as a matter of subjectivity and context. Gone was the idea of evil as an act that opposed God’s law and offended God’s righteousness.

Gone with those beliefs was any confidence in moral judgment. As Merkin suggests, postmoderns are more like Neville Chamberlain, trying to negotiate with evil, than like Winston Churchill, determined to oppose it by force when necessary.

The maker of the film, Barbet Schroeder, refuses to take a position in the film, resisting moral judgment. Indeed, he calls Verges a “perverse and decadent aesthete.” There is something particularly chilling about reducing evil to aesthetics.

The frightening specter we now face is of a postmodern world that is losing the last vestiges of confidence in moral judgment. Be advised . . . and be afraid.

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