

***On Evil*. Written by Terry Eagleton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 176 pages. ISBN: 978-0300151060. \$25.00 US, \$28.95 CDN.**

On Evil, which is impishly dedicated to Henry Kissinger, is not really a book about theodicy. Eagleton agrees with Paul Ricoeur that, “theodicy is a mad project.” The author focuses not on why evil exists, but the problem of defining it. His thesis is that we suffer from an incorrect understanding of evil that serves to exasperate destruction and suffering. A proper understanding of evil is to be found between two opposing fallacies. On the one hand, Eagleton rejects the liberal notion that evil simply does not exist. He assures us that it does. However, more destructive than the denial of evil is the conservative position that true evil is quite common. Eagleton argues that when we mistake mere “wickedness” (which can be reasoned with) for evil (which is senseless), we miss opportunities for peaceful resolution.

Eagleton’s prose is witty and accessible. There is much here to ponder over and enjoy. However, readers in search of a crisp and concise definition of evil may be disappointed. Rather than presenting a linear argument, *On Evil* proceeds in a “string of pearls” fashion wandering freely from Graham Greene to Thomas Aquinas, to Freud, to the Holocaust. At each juncture, Eagleton presents an interesting insight into the nature of evil. However, he rarely defines his subject in positive terms. The Holocaust is the only concrete example of pure evil offered in this book. To confine true evil to the horror of the Holocaust seems rather close to saying that evil does not exist at all. Indeed, Eagleton argues that evil is “nothing to lose sleep over” and is usually limited to the private sphere.

The first chapter, “Fictions of Evil,” explores case studies in tormented characters from 20th century literature. In the second chapter, Shakespeare’s Iago and the Weird Sisters are added to this list. This could be viewed as a rather odd project: attempting to define evil in the real world through examining fictitious characters. However, Eagleton assumes that evil is a rare and exceptional phenomenon and thus requires highly exceptional characters for his case studies. He argues that, “Evil is transcendence gone awry.” The characters he examines are motivated by a kind of “ontological sickness” that

is quite different from the worldly desires of the wicked. Evil entails both a desire for the infinite and a concomitant disregard for the immanent. In the grip of evil, creation appears as filth. This in turn inspires a fetish for death, destruction, and obscenity. The damned, he argues, are masochists who desire their damnation.

In the second chapter, “Obscene Enjoyment,” Eagleton introduces the most important distinction between evil and wickedness—that evil is “supremely pointless.” Evildoers have no material goal. They destroy in order to prove to themselves that their suffering is not unique and that creation itself is flawed. In this sense, Eagleton explains that, “Evil is a kind of cosmic sulking.” However, the practical distinction between evil and wickedness remains thorny. Eagleton makes the dangerous argument that Stalin and Mao killed with purpose and were thus merely wicked. The Nazis alone, he claims, were motivated by evil.

The final chapter, “Job’s Comforters,” begins by rejecting the project of theodicy. Evil, according to Eagleton cannot be justified or “explained” because it is inherently senseless. However, careful readers will observe that Eagleton does resolve the logical problem of evil as presented by Epicurus: God is not omnipotent. God is powerless to destroy evil because, following the thought of Augustine and Aquinas, evil is nothingness and nothingness cannot be destroyed.

In closing, Eagleton directs the reader’s attention to the far more pervasive problem of wickedness, which he argues is everywhere and shows no sign of abating. Unlike evil, wickedness generally arises from flawed institutions that create the material motivations to build nuclear weapons and carry out ecological devastation. The good news is that the wicked are rational beings and thus can be persuaded out of what they do. Eagleton argues that Islamic terrorism is ultimately a form of wickedness rather than evil. Although terrorism is not rational (he explains that terrorism has acquired “a momentum of its own”), he suggests that the claim that terrorists do what they do “because they are evil” is equally irrational. Thus labels like “the axis of evil” are ultimately counter-productive. Furthermore, to the extent that we exacerbate terrorism, we are complicit in

the destruction it causes. This, Eagleton claims, demonstrates the importance of properly defining what evil is.

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