THE RETURN OF EVIL

In philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, evil is back. The question of evil is, of course, an old and venerable one in Western philosophy, having fascinated philosophers from Socrates and Augustine through Leibniz and Kant. For much of this history, "the question of evil" was a theological one, namely: If God is beneficent and omnipotent, why does he allow there to be such evil in the world? After Kant, philosophy largely severed its ties with theology, and, with that, the question of evil receded. Evil seemed no longer to be a question for philosophy, but instead became a question for psychiatry, sociology, and biology. Yet, in the past few years, a loosely connected group of philosophers and theorists, influenced by the work of Immanuel Kant and Jacques Lacan, has returned to the question of evil.

Opening this section are interviews with two key figures in this reexamination of the place of evil in contemporary societies. In 1993, the philosopher Alain Badiou published *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, an analysis, critique, and reformulation of the discourse of evil in contemporary thought. Last year saw the publication of Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupancic's *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*, which includes an extended analysis of good and evil in Kant, literature, and contemporary culture. Despite their differences, these theorists reject both the theological and the scientific (psychological, sociological, etc.) interpretations of evil. Instead, they locate good and evil in the very structure of human subjectivity, agency, and freedom.

The editorial group of *Cabinet* first began planning this issue in the spring of 2001. We found ourselves repeatedly returning to the initial terms of our theme—more than one editorial meeting was dominated by discussions of its slipperiness and complexity, by long and sometimes contentious debates over definition and scope. Something that was of interest to us was that the proliferation of images of evil in contemporary popular culture in fact seemed to go hand in hand with a fundamental inability to confront the question of evil within its religious, philosophical, and metaphysical contexts. It seemed, as one writer has put, that Satan had died. Although the content of this issue is effectively the same one we planned almost 9 months ago, there can be no doubt, that the events of 11 September have changed the frame of reference around it. In August, the word *evil* was likely to draw a smile or even laughter. That is no longer true as we write this in November. On the other hand, it seems that the incessant rhetorical appeal to the word *evil* since September 11 has in no way made the possibility of real debate about the concept any more likely.

The following interviews with Alain Badiou and Alenka Zupancic were conducted via email in July-August 2001. Alain Badiou asked to add the final paragraphs of his interview after the events of 11 September. A small number of other authors also asked and were allowed to make slight amendments to pieces they had already submitted.

ON EVIL: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN BADIOU
CHRISTOPH COX AND MOLLY WHALEN

You argue that in our philosophical and political discourses today, evil is "self-evident," and that both this "self-evidence" and this conception of "evil" are problematic. What is "our consensual representation of evil" and what is wrong with it?

The idea of the self-evidence of evil is not, in our society, very old. It dates, in my opinion, from the end of the 1960s, when the big political movement of the 60s was finished. We then entered into a reactive period, a period that I call the Restoration. You know that, in France, "Restoration" refers to the period of the return of the King, in 1815, after the Revolution and Napoleon. We are in such a period. Today we see liberal capitalism and its political system, parlimentarianism, as the only natural and acceptable solutions. Every revolutionary idea is considered utopian and ultimately criminal. We are made to believe that the global spread of capitalism and what gets called "democracy" is the dream of all humanity. And also that the whole world wants the authority of the American Empire, and its military police, NATO.

In truth, our leaders and propagandists know very well that liberal capitalism is an inegalitarian regime, unjust, and unacceptable for the vast majority of humanity. And they know too that our "democracy" is an illusion: Where is the power of the people? Where is the political power for third world peasants, the European working class, the poor everywhere? We live in a contradiction: a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian—where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone—is presented to us as ideal. To justify their conservatism, the partisans of the established order cannot really call it ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible. Sure, they say, we may not live in a condition of perfect goodness. But we're lucky that we don't live in a condition of evil. Our democracy is not perfect. But it's better than the bloody dictatorships. Capitalism is unjust. But it's not criminal like Stalinism. We let millions of Africans die of AIDS, but we don't make racist nationalist declarations like Milosevic. We kill Iraqis with our airplanes, but we don't cut their throats with machetes like they do in Rwanda, etc.

That's why the idea of evil has become essential. No intellectual will actually defend the brutal power of money and the accompanying political disdain for the disenfranchised, or for manual laborers, but many agree to say that real evil is elsewhere. Who indeed today would defend the Stalinist terror, the African genocides, the Latin American torturers? Nobody. It's there that the consensus concerning evil is decisive. Under the pretext of not accepting evil, we end up making believe that we have, if not the good, at least the best possible state of affairs—even if this best is not so great. The refrain of "human rights" is nothing other than the ideology of modern liberal capitalism: We won't massacre you, we won't torture you in caves, so keep quiet and worship the golden calf. As for those who don't want to worship it, or who don't believe in our superiority, there's always the American army and its European minions to make them be quiet.

Note that even Churchill said that democracy (that is to say the regime of liberal capitalism) was not at all the best of political regimes, but rather the least bad. Philosophy has always been critical of commonly held opinions and of what seems obvious. Accept what you've got because all the rest belongs to evil is an obvious idea, which should therefore be immediately examined and critiqued.

My personal position is the following: It is necessary to examine, in a detailed way, the contemporary theory of evil, the ideology of human rights, the concept of democracy. It is necessary to show that nothing there leads in the direction of the real emancipation of

humanity. It is necessary to reconstruct rights, in everyday life as in politics, of truth and of the good. Our ability to once again have real ideas and real projects depends on it.

You say that, for liberal capitalism, evil is always elsewhere, the dreaded other, something that liberal capitalism believes it has thankfully banished and kept at bay. Yet isn't there also, in the contemporary imagination, a powerful idea of internal (social, psychological, domestic) evil? For decades, popular fllms and novels have been obsessed with the idea of evil lurking within (in the mind, in the house, in the neighborhood). The Timothy McVeigh affair in the US seems to have renewed political worries about "the evil within" (within each one of us, within the heart of the US). Just over a month ago, Andrea Yates, a Texas mother, systematically drowned her flve children, prompting a national discussion about whether or not we are all capable of such evil. Philosophically, the new interest in Kant's conception of "radical evil" (and its Lacanian reinterpretation) would seem to fall in line with this idea of internal (rather than external, political) evil. Indeed, throughout most of the history of the West, it would seem that evil has been conceived as "internal," as something that morally haunts each one of us. So, my questions: In addition to the notion of "external" evil you propose, do you also recognize this notion of "internal" evil? Is this idea perennial, or does it tell us something peculiar about our historical moment? Do you see these two notions of evil (external and internal) as connected with one another in any way?

There is no contradiction between the affirmation that liberal capitalism and democracy are the good and the affirmation that evil is a permanent possibility for any individual. The second thesis (evil inside of each of us) is simply the moral and religious complement to the first thesis, which is political (parliamentary capitalism as the good). There is even a "logical" connection between the two affirmations, as follows:

1. History shows that democratic liberal capitalism is the only economic, political, and social regime that is truly humane, that truly conforms to the good of humanity.

2. Every other political regime is a monstrous and bloody dictatorship, completely irrational.

3. The proof of this fact is that political regimes that have fought against liberalism and democracy all share the same face of evil. Thus, Fascism and Communism, which appeared to be opposites, were actually very similar. They were both of the "totalitarian" family, which is the opposite of the democratic-capitalism family.

4. These monstrous regimes cannot produce a rational project, an idea of justice or something of that sort. Those who have led these regimes (Fascist or Communist) were necessarily pathological cases: One needs to study Hitler or Stalin with the tool of criminal psychology. As for those who have supported them, and there were thousands of them, they were alienated by the totalitarian mystique. They were finally directed by evil and destructive passions.

5. If thousands of people were able to participate in such ridiculous and criminal undertakings, it is obviously because the possibility of being fascinated by evil exists in each of us. This possibility will be called "hatred of the Other." The conclusion will be, first, that we must support liberal democracy everywhere, and, second, that we must teach our children the ethical imperative of the love of the Other.

My position is obviously that this "reasoning" is purely illusory ideology. First, liberal capitalism is not at all the good of humanity. Quite the contrary; it is the vehicle of savage, destructive nihilism. Second, the Communist revolutions of the 20th century have represented grandiose efforts to create a completely different historical and political universe. Politics is not the manage-

ment of the power of the State. Politics is first the invention and the exercise of an absolutely new and concrete reality. Politics is the creation of thought. The Lenin who wrote *What is to be Done?*, the Trotsky who wrote *History of the Russian Revolution*, and the Mao Zedong who wrote *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* are intellectual geniuses, comparable to Freud or Einstein. Certainly, the politics of emancipation, or egalitarian politics, have not, thus far, been able to resolve the problem of the power of the State. They have exercised a terror that is finally useless. But that should encourage us to pick up the question where they left it off, rather than to rally to the capitalist, imperialist enemy. Third, the category "totalitarianism" is intellectually very weak. There is, on the side of Communism, a universal desire for emancipation, while on the side of Fascism, there is a national and racial desire. These are two radically opposed projects. The war between the two has indeed been the war between the idea of a universal politics and the idea of racial domination. Fourth, the use of terror in revolutionary circumstances or civil war does not at all mean that the leaders and militants are insane, or that they express the possibility of internal evil. Terror is a political tool that has been in use as long as human societies have existed. It should therefore be judged as a political tool, and not submitted to infantilizing moral judgment. It should be added that there are different types of terror. Our liberal countries know how to use it perfectly. The colossal American army exerts terrorist blackmail on a global scale, and prisons and executions exert an interior blackmail no less violent. Fifth, the only coherent theory of the subject (mine, I might add, in jest!) does not recognize in it any particular disposition toward evil. Even Freud's death drive is not particularly tied to evil. The death drive is a necessary component of sublimation and creation, just as it is of murder and suicide. As for the love of the Other, or, worse, the "recognition of the Other," these are nothing but Christian confections. There is never "the Other" as such. There are projects of thought, or of actions, on the basis of which we distinguish between those who are friends, those who are enemies, and those who can be considered neutral. The question of knowing how to treat enemies or neutrals depends entirely on the project concerned, the thought that constitutes it, and the concrete circumstances (is the project in an escalating phase? is it very dangerous? etc.).

Given what you have said, one might expect you to turn the tables, to assert that, contrary to the prevailing view, liberal capitalism is itself "evil." But you don't do that. Instead, you offer an alternative theory of evil.

Were I to reverse the tables, as you suggest, I would leave everything in place. To say that liberal capitalism is evil would not change anything. I would still be subordinating politics to humanistic and Christian morality: I would say: "Let's fight against evil." But I've had enough of "fighting against," of "deconstructing," of "surpassing," of "putting an end to," etc. My philosophy desires affirmation. I want to fight for; I want to know what I have for the good and to put it to work. I refuse to be content with the "least evil." It is very fashionable right now to be modest, not to think big. Grandeur is considered a metaphysical evil. Me, I am for grandeur, I am for heroism. I am for the affirmation of the thought and the deed.

Certainly, it is necessary to propose another theory of evil. But that is to say, essentially, another theory of the good. Evil would be to compromise on the question of the good. To give up is always evil. To renounce liberation politics, renounce a passionate love, renounce an artistic creation.... evil is the moment when I lack the strength to be true to the good that compels me.

The real question underlying the question of evil is the following: What is the good? All my philosophy strives to answer this question. For complex reasons, I give the good the name "truths" (in the plural). A truth is a concrete process that starts by an upheaval (an encounter, a general revolt, a surprising new invention), and develops as fidelity to the novelty thus experimented. A truth is the subjective development of that which is at once both new and universal. New: that which is unforeseen by the order of creation. Universal: that which can interest, rightly, every human individual, according to his pure humanity (which I call his generic humanity). To become a subject (and not remain a simple human animal), is to participate in the coming into being of a universal novelty. That requires effort, endurance, sometimes self-denial. I often say it's necessary to be the "activist" of a truth. There is evil each time egoism leads to the renunciation of a truth. Then, one is de-subjectivized. Egoistic self-interest carries one away, risking the interruption of the whole progress of a truth (and thus of the good).

One can, then, define evil in one phrase: evil is the interruption of a truth by the pressure of particular or individual interests. Even the case that you cite above—the woman who drowns her five infants—springs from this vision of things. The debate you raise is absurd: Obviously, everyone is "capable" of everything. One has seen everywhere good people becoming torturers, or peaceful citizens brutalizing people over insignificant things. This consideration is of no interest. It only reminds us that the human species is an animal species, governed by the lowest interests, of which moreover capitalist profit is merely the legal formalization. All that is short of good and evil, it is nothing more than the rule of impulses. The question of evil starts when one can say what good one is talking about. I am convinced that the murder of five children is actually tied to a brutal renunciation of the good, in the form of a love process. In any case, that's the only case in which it makes any sense to speak of evil. The myth that one thinks of is Medea. She also kills her children. And it's not evil, in the tragic sense of the term, because this murder is entirely dependent on her love for Jason.

In your view, then, is the realm of the human animal simply beneath good and evil (such that acts of torture, for example, are not properly "evil")? Does one not have a moral obligation to become a subject (instead of remaining a human animal)? And, thus, is one's failure to become a subject not a moral failure?

The question actually combines two common conceptions of morality (and thus of the distinction between good and evil): the "natural" conception, derived from Rousseau, and the "formal" conception, derived from Kant:

1. There is a "natural" morality, things that are obviously bad in the opinion of any human consciousness. Accordingly, evil exists for the human animal. The example given is that of torture.

2. There is a "formal" morality, a universal obligation that is above any particular situation. And therefore there is a universal evil, which, too, is independent of circumstances. The example given is that of the obligation to become a subject, to place oneself above the basic human animalism. It is bad to refuse to become a fully human subject, no matter what might be the particular terms of this becoming.

I must, of course, specify that I am absolutely opposed to these two conceptions. I maintain that the natural state of the human animal has nothing to do with good or evil. And I maintain that the kind of formal moral obligation described in Kant's categorical imperative does not actually exist.

Take the example of torture. In a civilization as sophisticated as the Roman Empire, not only is torture not considered an evil, it is actually appreciated as a spectacle. In arenas, people are devoured by tigers; they are burned alive; the audience rejoices to see combatants cut each other's throats. How, then, could we think that torture is evil for every human animal? Aren't we the same animal as Sencea or Marcus Aurelius? I should add that the armed forces of my country, France, with the approval of the governments of the era and the majority of public opinion, tortured all the prisoners during the Algerian War. The refusal of torture is a historical and cultural phenomenon, not at all a natural one. In a general way, the human animal knows cruelty as well as it knows pity; the one is just as natural as the other, and neither one has anything to do with good or evil. One knows of crucial situations where cruelty is necessary and useful, and of other situations where pity is nothing but a form of contempt for others. You won't find anything in the structure of the human animal on which to base the concept of evil, nor, moreover, that of the good.

But the formal solution isn't any better. Indeed, the obligation to be a subject doesn't have any meaning, for the following reason: The possibility of becoming a subject does not depend on us, but on that which occurs in circumstances that are always singular. The distinction between good and evil already supposes a subject, and thus can't apply to it. It's always for a subject, not a pre-subjectivized human animal, that evil is possible. For example, if, during the occupation of France by the Nazis, I join the Resistance, I become a subject of History in the making. From the inside of this subjectivization, I can tell what is evil (to betray my comrades, to collaborate with the Nazis, etc.). I can also decide what is good outside of the habitual norms. Thus the writer Marguerite Duras has recounted how, for reasons tied to the resistance to the Nazis, she participated in acts of torture against traitors. The whole distinction between good and evil arises from inside a becoming-subject, and varies with this becoming (which I myself call philosophy, the becoming of a truth).

To summarize: There is no natural definition of evil; evil is always that which, in a particular situation, tends to weaken or destroy a subject. And the conception of evil is thus entirely dependent on the events from which a subject constitutes itself. It is the subject who prescribes what evil is, not a natural idea of evil that defines what a "moral" subject is. There is also no formal imperative from which to define evil, even negatively. In fact, all imperatives presume that the subject of the imperative is already constituted, and in specific circumstances. And thus there can be no imperative to become a subject, except as an absolutely vacuous statement. That is also why there is no general form of evil, because evil does not exist except as a judgment made, by a subject, on a situation, and on the consequences of his own actions in this situation. So the same act (to kill, for example) may be evil in a certain subjective context, and a necessity of the good in another.

I must particularly insist that the formula "respect for the Other" has nothing to do with any serious definition of good and evil. What does "respect for the Other" mean when one is at war against an enemy, when one is brutally left by a woman for someone else, when one must judge the works of a mediocre "artist," when science is faced with obscurantist sects, etc.? Very often, it is the "respect for Others" that is injurious, that is evil. Especially when it is resistance against others, or even hatred of others, that drives a subjectively just action. And it's always in these kinds of circumstances (violent conflicts, brutal changes, passionate loves, artistic creations) that the question of evil can be truly asked for a subject. evil does not exist either as nature or as law. It exists, and varies, in the singular becoming of the true.

In response to an earlier question, you remarked that "[i]t is necessary to reconstruct rights, in everyday life as in politics, of truth and of the good." Can you say more about how the ethic of truths might get mobilized in practical terms, and how this might constitute an alternative to the current conception of "human rights"?

Take the nearest example: the terrible criminal attack in New York in September, with its thousands of casualties. If you reason in terms of the morality of human rights, you say, with President Bush: "These are terrorist criminals. This is a struggle of good against evil." But are Bush's policies, in Palestine or Iraq for example, really good? And, in saying that these people are evil, or that they don't respect human rights, do we understand anything about the mindset of those who killed themselves with their bombs? Isn't there a lot of despair and violence in the world caused by the fact that the politics of Western powers, and of the American government in particular, are utterly destitute of ingenuity and value? In the face of crimes, terrible crimes, we should think and act according to concrete political truths, rather than be guided by the stereotypes of any sort of morality. The whole world understands that the real question is the following: Why do the politics of the Western powers, of NATO, of Europe and the USA, appear completely unjust to two out of three inhabitants of the planet? Why are five thousand American deaths considered a cause for war, while five hundred thousand dead in Rwanda and a projected ten million dead from AIDS in Africa do not, in our opinion, merit outrage? Why is the bombardment of civilians in the US evil, while the bombardment of Baghdad or Belgrade today, or that of Hanoi or Panama in the past, is good? The ethic of truths that I propose proceeds from concrete situations, rather than from an abstract right, or a spectacular evil. The whole world understands these situations, and the whole world can act in a disinterested fashion prompted by the injustice of these situations. evil in politics is easy to see: It's absolute inequality with respect to life, wealth, power. Good is equality. How long can we accept the fact that what is needed for running water, schools, hospitals, and food enough for all humanity is a sum that corresponds to the amount spent by wealthy Western countries on perfume in a year? This is not a question of human rights and morality. It is a question of the fundamental battle for equality of all people, against the law of profit, whether personal or national.

In the same way, the good in artistic action is the invention of new forms that convey the meaning of the world. The good in science is the audacity of free thought, the joy of exact knowledge. Likewise, the good in love is the understanding of what difference really is, of what it is to construct a world when one is two, and not one. And evil, then, is academic rehearsals or "cultural" commerce; it is knowledge in the service of capitalist profit; it is sexuality considered as merely a technique of pleasure [*jouissance*]. I'll repeat it: All the world shares these experiences. The ethics of truth always returns, in precise circumstances, to fighting for the true against the four fundamentals forms of evil: obscurantism, commercial academicism, the politics of profit and inequality, and sexual barbarism.