Review of “Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives”

Julia J. Aaron
Clarion University of Pennsylvania

María Pía Lara notes, in “Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory,” that “There are thousands of books on evil, yet not one of them presents a satisfying theory of it.” (p. 239) Her statement from the last essay of this book sums up this anthology as well. Perhaps it is the nature of the topic or the current state of discussion in this field of study. In any case, Rethinking Evil must ultimately be added to those thousands of others books. This certainly does not mean that the book is not worth reading. It is important to point out that the book does accomplish the editor’s stated goal “to open up a new space for the discussion of the problem of evil.” (p. vii) As a whole, the anthology adds to the body of literature in this field of study and strongly encourages scholars to focus on the topic of evil. Those readers looking for the satisfactory theory that is omitted in other books will not find that here.

Lara is certainly correct concerning the importance of this topic. Within recent years, it has become apparent that discussions, and understanding, of evil are crucial to our survival in the contemporary world. Thus, the call by several of these authors to expand and integrate various fields in the pursuit of understanding this topic is an important one. A few of these essays do offer some concrete suggestions for future directions to increase knowledge or for application of existing knowledge to contemporary situations. The majority of the articles provide a historical review of earlier philosophical discussions of evil, and the book is quite valuable in this respect.

This anthology is divided into four parts. Part One, “A Critical Review of Evil,” primarily addresses the traditional problem of evil. This part of the book offers a good review of this topic and provides some insights into contemporary philosophical discussions of evil. As might be expected, the one attempt to resolve this problem does not prove satisfactory. In “Is God Evil?,” Isabel Cabrera suggests that we can avoid the problem of evil by recognizing that “the deity cannot be the subject of our moral judgments.” (p. 22) She explains this in terms of religious experiences and points out that we can only use anthropomorphic language to “speak with God” (p. 26) and such language cannot be used to conceptualize God. Her proposed demonstration that evil can exist while we have a relationship with the sacred that we experience as good, seems inadequate. Perhaps we must be careful about our conceptualizations of the divine. Yet, if our experiences provide any evidence, then communicating with a God that we experience as loving still raises questions concerning the existence of evil.

Part Two, “Evil and Moral Philosophy,” contains essays that offer the most detailed account of philosophical views concerning evil, especially the views of Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt.
Thus, this anthology proves extremely valuable to individuals interested in these two authors’ views concerning human evil. In fact, most of the essays in this book discuss one or both of these authors. Arendt scholars will find that almost every essay in the text discusses some aspect of her views, and the “banality” of evil is extensively explored. The discussions of the “banality” of evil range from historical material (for example, the fact that Arendt actually got the term from Karl Jaspers even though she did not credit him for the term) to discussions of what this perspective on evil can mean for us today. Robert Fine’s “Understanding Evil: Arendt and the Final Solution” is particularly interesting because it provides new interpretations concerning the “banality” of evil. Fine’s insightful approach to this topic is certainly worth reading. “An Evil Heart: Moral Evil and Moral Identity” by Maeve Cooke is also worth mentioning. Her essay does a good job of pointing out the importance of connecting evil with moral identity (p. 115) and explaining why she believes that Arendt’s unwillingness to call Eichmann “evil” was a mistake. (p. 116)

The essays in Part Three, “Metaphysical Approaches for a Problem of Evil,” offer the best contemporary analyses of the anthology. Jeffrey Alexander’s “Toward a Sociology of Evil: Getting beyond Modernist Common Sense about the Alternative to ‘the Good,’” is an interesting discussion of the role that sociology has played as well as new directions concerning the role that it could play in the study and elimination of evil. This essay is valuable for sociologists as well as anyone interested in an approach that draws from several disciplines. The other essay that is especially noteworthy in this section is Carlos Pereda’s “Forgiveness and Oblivion: A New Form of Banality of Evil?” Pereda, like Fine, introduces some new definitions for the “banality” of evil and discusses recent decisions in Latin America that have provided amnesty to individuals who have committed atrocities. He provides a convincing argument that these decisions, intended to maintain national cohesion, are an attempt to erase social memory and can be considered a new version of evil. He also suggests that “real international courts” (p. 214) should be formed to determine justice in cases of tyranny.

Part four, “Narratives of Evil,” concludes the volume with two essays that discuss methods for relating views about evil through narratives. In addition to reviewing some of the previous literature on this subject, both of these essays by Bernstein and Lara offer interesting insights concerning the purposes and value of telling stories about evil. Carol Berstein's claim that, after actual evils, there is no happy ending for individuals who do not survive and survivors “may undergo a double suffering from repetition of the event in memory or the effort to understand the incomprehensible” (p. 231) is both thought provoking and troubling. Indeed, this is the stuff that stories should convey in an attempt to bring peace to victims and prevent future social evils. Lara mentions that part of the goal of narrating evil is to show how the symbolic elements are related to various social sciences, (p. 247) and notes that she develops this topic further in other cited works. Her suggestion that it may be possible for some storytelling methods to “reduce public tolerance for violence” (p. 248) is interesting and important, but this topic is also discussed in other works by this author.

Finally, this is not a book that would be useful in most undergraduate classes. The detailed analyses of specific historical problems or texts are better suited for graduate students or individuals who have a specific interest in this field of study. Additionally, the style of writing and focus of the essays will not appeal to many people outside of academia. Since issues concerning evil go well beyond institutional walls, I hope that this collection of essays successfully achieves its goal to stimulate discussions of evil. Such discussion must ultimately find its way out of higher education
to have some impact on the social and individual evils that this book, in part, attempts to address.

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Clarion University of Pennsylvania

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