Book Review of Jörg Albertz (Ed.) 'Rennaissance des Bösen?'
Dennen, J.M.G. van der

Published in:
Default journal

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2005

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

Copyright
Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): http://www.rug.nl/research/portal. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.
This small volume contains the papers of a conference (May 21-24, 1998) on the general theme of evil (*das Böse*): two contributions by Franz Wuketits (‘Die Faszination des Bösen’, 9-26; ‘Sind wir zur Unmoral verurteilt?’, 137-56); Peter Meyer (‘Krieg – das kollektive Böse?’ Evolutionistische Perspektiven zum Verhältnis von Gut und Böse’, 65-82); Cristoph Antweiler (‘Zur Ethnologie des ‘Bösen’”, 83-112). I shall confine my review to these contributions. The other contributions, Bernhard Verbeek (‘Der Umgang mit dem Blauen Planeten – Das Naive und das Böse’, 9-26) and Wolfgang Kaul (‘Die Religionen und das Böse’, 43-64) only tangentially touch upon the problem of evil; and Maria Wuketits (‘Böse Frauen – die Schattenseite des ‘schwachen Geschlechts’”, 113-24) and Udo Jesionek (‘Böse Kinder – Jugendliche als Täter’, 125-36) discuss the criminal psychology of women and juveniles respectively, and show that some of the crimes perpetrated by women and children may be quite hideous, ghastly and repulsive (such as Lizzie Borden slaying her parents with an ax) – but these crimes generally still are a far cry from what is commonly called ‘evil’.

Wuketits utilizes the concept of ‘evil’ to designate human behavior (in contrast to a metaphysical notion of ‘Evil’) that is considered to be ‘immoral’. Fortunately, we do not habitually commit acts of evil, but that does not necessarily mean that most of us are – therefore – more or less morally superior creatures. On the contrary, we abstain from such acts mainly by the fear of negative sanctions, and cowardice. The other side of the medal is that we often secretly admire those who are not troubled too much by inhibitions in social affairs.

Lies and tactical deceptions are some of the aspects of what Wuketits calls ‘everyday evil’. We have to realize that we are designed by natural selection to be egotists, kin altruists (nepotists), and ethnocentrists.

Why does evil fascinate? Firstly, because we have the tendency to react to possibly hostile strangers with fear and diffidence, and this fear is easily converted into blind fury and ‘fraternal’ murder – in which case the ‘evil’ act is perceived as meritorious by the perpetrator. Secondly, political and economic institutions can override individual moralism, providing their members with ‘sanctions for evil’. Thirdly, there is the fascination of everything that is forbidden – as everyone remembers from his own youth. Evil and its fascination is of all times and places, therefore Wuketits does not believe that there is a particular *renaissance* of evil.

In his final contribution, Wuketits reasons that morality is a biological category and arises because there exist conflicts of interests in every socially living species. The paradox of human existence is the fact that humans are capable contemporaneously of utterly egotistic (selfish) and extremely altruistic acts, hostility to outgroup members and self-sacrifice toward ingroup members. “While human beings are clearly capable of extreme cruelty and violence toward their fellow human beings, people also display extraordinary acts of kindness, generosity and sacrifice on behalf of others” (Clary, 1994: 93). An important component in
the explanation of morality (or immorality) is that humans evolved in small kin groups (Sympathiegruppen). Our morality is essentially a small-group morality (meaning, among other things, that “Thou shalt not kill” applies only to ingroup members, not to the rest of mankind). Beyond this small-group nepotism, which is governed by rules of reciprocity and indirect reciprocal altruism, sympathy and empathy and social responsibility toward outsiders were never strongly selected.

Antweiler discusses the phenomenon of ethnocentrism in more detail. A clear attribute of the ideology or world view behind ethnocentrism is a closed, unfragmented, unitary cosmology, which leads to a superiority delusion (‘chosen people complex’) on the one hand, and a dualistic moral universe on the other hand (a ‘good’ endosphere and a ‘bad’ exosphere: Us [morally superior] versus Them [morally inferior]). Small wonder that universally ‘evil’ is located in persons outside (or on the periphery of) the own in-group.

Also Meyer notes that humans (at least human males) have always been ready to fight for the maintenance or consolidation of their own cosmic order, and to regard everything outside this order as a potential threat, or even ‘evil’: the basic pattern of ethnocentric thinking (“Man kann dies als Grundmuster ethnozentrischen Denkens bezeichnen”) (p. 68).

Regarding the split moral (Manichaean) universe, Meyer explains that the duty to reciprocate originally applied only to members of the own kin group, to individuals who contributed to one’s own self-interest in the first place. Against this background, it is not difficult to understand that everything which threatens this reciprocity network, and therewith the individual self-interests, is unreflexively perceived as evil. Consequently, ingroup members seldom hesitate to apply violent measures not only to outgroup enemies, but also to ingroup ‘renegades’ by means of ostracism.

In human history, wars (as collisions of organized and armed collectives) arose some 8 to 10,000 years ago. They were conflicts about territory, water, and other vital resources, between and among sedentary communities. Individuals would probably not have had many opportunities to disengage from these violent clashes, but beyond this coercive aspect, people seem to have a ‘natural’ inclination to cooperate, to obey and to subordinate – which is only an extension of the individual imperative to survival. In case of collective conflict, the survival of the group and the survival of the individual are equivalent, so it is only sensible to subordinate to the group’s (strategic) demands and fulfil one’s duties of reciprocity (especially on behalf of kin). “Es zeigt sich, daß die Bereitschaft zur Teilnahme an kollektiven Gewalthandlungen wie dem Krieg vor allem durch unser Bestreben unterstützt wird, uns mit anderen zusammenzuschließen” (p. 80).

Though Wuketits emphasizes the banality of evil and addresses the concept of ‘everyday evil’, Meyer considers warfare to be evil, and Antweiler underlines the evil of the ethnocentric worldview, it is a pity that the authors hardly touch upon what is generally considered to be the real evil in the literature: ‘senseless’ violence, genocides, massacres and war atrocities, and gross human rights violations such as torture and random state terror.