

A Post-Secular Faith? Connolly on Pluralism and Evil

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Introduction

In his 2002 State of the Union Address, US President George W. Bush warned his audience of an ‘axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world’. It is tempting to roll one’s eyes in contemptuous disbelief at this now familiar refrain. Yet, however we may react to Bush’s terminology, it is certain that we cannot help but react. That phrase, of course, was calculated precisely to have an immediate, practical effect by dividing the world and forcing us to take sides. For few notions have the visceral, rhetorical power of the term ‘evil’. Even when we oppose its use, we often react with the very gut-instinct such notions are designed to activate. Whilst, on occasion, philosophers accuse each other of ‘category errors’, perhaps even of some disgraceful ‘performative contradiction’, these complaints barely come close to the sheer normative force of vocabularies that invoke religious terms.

It might be assumed, then, that a serious, emancipatory politics cannot deal in such charged concepts without collapsing into a potentially barbarous mysticism. Surely the language of evil lends itself too easily to the apocalyptic visions of reactionary conservatism to be of value for those with progressive goals? Yet William E. Connolly is one of a number of contemporary political philosophers who has looked to the vocabulary of religion and, indeed, to the term evil in order to explore the possibilities for a radical, democratic politics. How he does this and how we might respond to the challenge to think pluralism in relation to evil are the focus of this chapter.

The Post-Secular Turn

If national and international politics has long been witness to the deployment of a none-too-subtle religious language, in recent years this language has also come to preoccupy political philosophy. Ideas about evil, but also other elements of a religious style of discourse, including the very notion of religion itself, have come into focus in broadly ‘post-modern’ philosophical enquiries (see, for example, Badiou, 2001 and 2003; Derrida, 2001; Eagleton, 2005; Vattimo and Rorty, 2005). Common to many of these enquiries is a deliberate renunciation of ‘secularist’ rationalism and an effort to engage an array of ideas and experiences that, once, might have been dismissed by a section of the progressive Left as being of an unacceptably religious nature. Of course, aspects of religious discourse have always been present in philosophy—in the sense that modern philosophy ‘took over’ or ‘re-occupied’ the fundamental themes that theology once arrogated to itself—but political philosophers have long been wary of thinking their concepts primarily in the terms of religion, for fear of giving ground to what Hegel called a ‘rapturous haziness’ that offers ‘edification rather than insight’ (Hegel, 1977: 6, 5). If modern philosophy inherits questions of the soul, salvation, charity or justice, it has largely modified these terms by translating them into a secular frame.

However, in the work of recent thinkers such as, for example, Derrida, Laclau or Badiou, we witness a returning interest in the structure of religious discourse, be it through notions of the ‘Messianic’ or the universalism of St Paul. In renouncing a purely secular language that renders all experiences transparent to rational discourse, vocabularies attuned to a religious register come close to grasping the sometimes ineffable and often abundant excesses of meaning in social and political contest.

Religious texts and religious thought often invite us to reason from an aporetic sense of being—a fundamental dislocation of selfhood—as the premise to a deeply ethical engagement with the world. Contemporary philosophers, increasingly released from the secular-rational straight-jacket, have found this combined ethical and ontological language to be a bountiful resource. Without in any way endorsing religious worship, nevertheless the practical, performative character of the language of the religious—its direct appeal to a sense of self-hood and its paradoxical insertion in the world—has caught the imagination of philosophers (see Caputo, 2001). As we shall see, Connolly shares in this ‘post-secular’ trend in his effort to reconstruct a radical pluralism by reference to a concept of evil.

But the notion of evil also has a particular resonance outside of philosophical enquiry. Evil is a powerful evaluative term in popular discourse as we continue to witness experiences of terrorism, genocide, civil conflict and plenty other acts of daily but almost incomprehensible barbarity (see Cole, 2006). As a term that designates the utterly malicious, sometimes barely comprehensible qualities or motivations of certain acts, accusations of evil usually encompass both a profound moral response and themselves invoke a desired moral order as a way of framing and making sense of actions that transgress the limits of our moral intuitions. For this reason, too, it is also a deeply problematic notion. It may help us look across our moral horizons but in so doing it permits us crudely to reinforce them, assigning responsibilities and suggesting punishments for moral transgressions that, on reflection, may seem just as bad as the ‘crimes’ they claim to redress. In setting a moral frontier, popular discourses of evil may allow us to name the unnameable, yet they often do so by radically narrowing ethical engagement. The ‘problem’ of evil, at least from the perspective of post-secularism, concerns how we remain critically attuned to our evaluative intuitions whilst at the same time avoiding the importation of crude, exclusionary logics that a highly-charged language often entails.

Below I want to explore some elements of this problem in relation to Connolly’s work. For Connolly occupies a distinctive position in contemporary political philosophy, somewhere between the two poles noted above. That is, as he has himself declared, he stands as an exemplary post-secularist, one seeking positively to engage the dynamic technologies of the self offered up in religious discourse (see Connolly, 1999) whilst, simultaneously, refusing the moral conservatism and metaphysical rigidity common to religion in favour of a radical pluralism (see Connolly, 2005a). Yet, as we shall see, although Connolly wholeheartedly rejects a metaphysical notion of evil, the term returns in his own reaction to the September 11 attacks in the US. A ‘non-theological’ concept of evil then comes to stand as an important plank in his defence of pluralism. As I shall argue below, this version of evil appears to describe a destructive nihilism, conceived as the visceral annihilation, or closure, of a meaningful world. In turn, this usage raises the question of whether, in defence of a robust pluralism, it is necessary to figure evil in a stronger narrative than Connolly is prepared to admit.

Pluralism Beyond Secularism

As is well-known, Connolly’s contribution to political philosophy is propelled by a radical orientation towards pluralism, one that extends beyond the established liberal pluralism of post-war political science to endorse a variety of social differences from

race and ethnicity to gender and sexuality. In *Why I am Not a Secularist* (1999) Connolly underscores the post-secular reasoning that informs his radical pluralism. Secularism, he argues, has tended to narrow down the horizons of democratic thought, constraining it within a liberal mindset that, he feels, is 'insufficiently alert to the layered density of political thinking and judgment' (Connolly, 1999: 4). Whilst secular liberalism has doubtless advanced the cause of democracy, not least in its separation of Church and state, its tendency to an arid rationalism and, often, to a dogmatic insistence on a single form of 'public reason' nevertheless fails to engage the rich and contrasting multiplicity of experiences, libidinal investments and beliefs at work in a democratic order.

Connolly's 'post-modern' pluralism, by contrast, seeks to open up to a greater range of social and cultural experiences of difference by refashioning secularism around what he has called a 'politics of becoming', that is, an anti-essentialist conceptualisation of social identities, differences and their mutual relations (see Connolly, 2002a). Whilst retaining secularism's distrust of dogmatic religiosity, Connolly promotes an 'ethos of engagement' among secular and religious traditions in order that new connections as well as contrasting differences can be positively explored. An ethos of engagement is imagined to open up possibilities in which different 'faiths' (theist and atheist), as he calls them, may enter into contest and modify their mutual hostility, with the potential to cultivate a wider landscape of democratic interaction.

'Forbearance and modesty' claims Connolly 'are presumptive virtues in pluralist politics' (1999: 9). Greater engagement among contrasting faiths, conducted in an atmosphere of 'generosity' towards the differences of the other, can escape secular liberalism's hard-line refusal to engage 'the visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity' without simultaneously submitting to a single conception of the Good. Although he does not imagine pluralism to bring a glorious peace and harmony to diverse and antagonistic democratic cultures, Connolly dares to argue for a public life where contrasting metaphysical conceptions have not been 'strained out' or privatised but brought into a more productive proximity. The best that can be hoped for here is perhaps an 'agonistic' respect rather than a new consensus.

Connolly's efforts to address the layered, 'visceral register of being' as a mark of the depth and intensity of social identity is central to his argument for pluralism. For here plurality is itself a condition of the self, as much as of society, and Connolly's aim in delineating an ethos of engagement is to permit the otherness within individual selves to flow more freely than at present in a wider world of other selves. Plurality is both 'within' and 'without', we might say. Connolly's proposed ethos is not therefore a rational consensus to be achieved by universal reason among self-contained, singular selves, nor even a unifying cultural tradition, so much as an invitation to explore the otherness within, to soften—without altogether abandoning—the structures of personal identity.

In this endeavour, Connolly takes up a distinctively Nietzschean orientation to morality. Moral values are treated not as eternal principles so much as metaphysical tools to order the layers of desire across the fabric of the self. The task is not to relinquish these in favour of some 'post-metaphysical' order of procedural values but to return ourselves to the work they do on the 'inside' as well as the 'outside'. It is no

surprise, then, to find Connolly inviting us to consider cultivating the ‘arts of the self’, that is, to undertake a ‘selective desanctification’ of elements of our individual identity, weakening its hierarchies and exploring its intensities such that its differences no longer coalesce around a dogmatic vision of wholeness and unity (see Connolly, 1999: 143-52).

Although brief, this summary of Connolly’s post-secular approach to pluralism serves to illuminate some of the character of his political ethics, in particular the Nietzschean/Foucauldian presentation of how moral values work upon the self. It was in this vein, too, that Connolly undertook his earlier examination in The Augustinian Imperative (2002b, first published in 1993) of the kind of moral authoritarianism he hoped (and continues) to challenge with his pluralist ethos of engagement. It is here, too, that we first come across the problem of evil in his work.

Connolly on Augustine

The ‘Augustinian Imperative’, as Connolly sees it, involves the designation of an authoritative and objective moral order towards which we are encouraged, as a matter of urgency, to adapt ourselves ‘from within’. In his book, Connolly explores the structure of this argument by traversing Saint Augustine’s texts concerning his own (that is, Augustine’s) conversion to Christianity and his admonishment of pagan practices. Whilst Connolly follows the logic of Augustine’s Christian message, he is not interested in the nuances of theology so much as the exemplary nature of Augustine’s moral discourse. The faith to which Augustine converts and upon which he becomes an authority can be seen to exemplify the structure of moral discourse more generally, whether it be religiously-inspired morality or a secular version of the Moral Law. The Augustinian imperative is the imperative of all moralities: if you fear the loss of yourself in eternal damnation then reach out for salvation by purifying your soul of evil through acceptance of the Divine command. Moral order will then be restored.

Bound up with the imperative to align oneself with the moral order, as Connolly views it, is a politics of difference and identity in which the self is constituted through moralizing practices that shape and discipline, hollow out and repress various elements of subjectivity. The transcendental source of commands that calculate punishment and rewards in this scenario is all the more powerful for its presumed neutrality and its inscrutability. Subjects of Christian conversion act upon themselves with strategies of power designed to smooth out moral unevenness, internal dissonances, contradictions and fugitive experiences that pervert and transgress a Divinely-instituted harmony they are forbidden to question.

But, of course, there is a deception at work here. Connolly examines Augustine’s comments on confession as a practice in which a divided will, in need of unification with a ‘higher’ transcendental guide, invokes the very order that purportedly ‘completes’ it. Echoing Foucault’s remarks on confession as a power relationship operative via a procedure of ‘unburdening’, an interiorised self-disclosure aimed at normalizing Truth (see Foucault, 1978: 60-63), Connolly suggests that the very act of confession creates the divided identity that confession is designed to restore. The obsessive attention to admitting and expunging one’s personal misdemeanours and desires is itself a process of fabricating a higher, purer self against which, inevitably,

we are diminished. Likewise, Augustine's message is sustained through the vilification of certain practices as well as other doctrines that present religion, and particularly, Christianity differently, that is, in ways that reduce the demand for salvation by an omnipotent God.

Whilst the question of evil is not the sole focus of Connolly's enquiries, nevertheless, the nature of evil for Augustine occupies much of the text. Evil denotes the transgression of the moral order, whether conceived as a Divine command or the natural harmony of the Cosmos created by God. Rooted in the 'original sin' of Adam and Eve, evil is not itself a quality of the Divine will but is the force that subverts that will. It lies within the intrinsically divided soul of the individual subject who desires to act with free will, that is, without the guidance of its higher source. Evil is therefore a condition in which, like Adam and Eve, we are set loose from our essential dependency on a higher will and act with what Augustine calls the 'deformed liberty' of subjects who presume the autonomy of God himself. 'Evil' therefore describes a condition by which, in acting against the Divine command, we deprive ourselves of our full identities as subjects of God.

This conception of evil as the transgression of an intrinsic moral order, as the self-deprivation of a higher moral source with which, despite ourselves, we are intrinsically bound up, has become a powerful counterpoint to modern liberal thought. Arguably, it provides a more compelling response to the question of malice and wickedness in human behaviour than did Kant, for example, in his Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason. For Kant (1998), 'radical evil' appears, ultimately, to reduce to egoistic behaviour; a failure fully to attune oneself to the universality of a rational maxim. For Kantian liberals, moral demands issue from an autonomous rational subjectivity whose law must be self-given. But, as Simon Critchley argues, this autonomous self is a precarious construction, premised on an asserted 'fact of reason' that can only tell us what our duty is but cannot motivate us to pursue it (Critchley, 2007: 26-37). In François Flahault's terms, the problem of 'malice', as he prefers to call it, is that it affects 'subjects of existence' and not 'subjects of knowledge' (Flahault, 2003: 9). That is, evil (or malice) reaches into the structure of our being and our answering it cannot merely be a matter of knowing 'right' from 'wrong'. In Critchley's terms, a compelling ethical demand is one that divides us to the core, one that exceeds the fantasy of autonomous self-hood. The rational subjects of the Enlightenment, who regarded themselves as essentially good, sought to master themselves so as to escape the problems of existing raised in the idea of evil. By contrast, the Augustinian subject is always-already a divided self with a precarious, uncertain existence that cannot be mastered without Divine guidance.

The attraction of Augustine, to Connolly and to many others, then, lies precisely in this acknowledgement of the problem of existence—a sense of existential unease or division that persistently erupts within us as and which refuses the psychic self-sufficiency of Enlightenment rationality. As suggested earlier, it is precisely this awareness of the aporetic nature of human existence which has attracted post-secularists to religious texts. These have been utilised to explore the contingency of subjectivity and to develop critiques of liberal reason on that basis. Yet Augustine's response to this aporetic condition—the onto-theological strategy of Divine salvation—is, of course, not attractive for those of a radical democratic persuasion. Nor, according to Connolly, is it wholly convincing.

The question of how an omnipotent and omniscient entity can permit, or at least fail to foresee, the transgression of His own will remains a glaring problem and Connolly swiftly exposes this blind spot in Augustine's vision of a Divinely-governed order. Indeed, the reason Augustine is worthy of examination at all is because his effort to construct a water-tight case for a moral order simply cannot fulfil its promise, and the gaps in this case are opportunities for Connolly to explore moments in Augustine's texts where alternative readings may be possible.

Augustine's imperative turns out to be a good foil for the kind of post-Nietzschean 'generosity' towards difference and otherness that the moralizing discourses of 'modern Augustinians'—for instance, the religious Right in America who often dwell upon the absolutes of culture and identity rather than theology—usually disavow (Connolly, 2002b: 82). As we have noted above, the 'critical pluralism' to which Connolly subscribes is a kind of inverse of the thirst for a Moral Law. It is the 'inverse' in the differential sense that moralizing discourses renounce the 'ethical' engagement with otherness that Connolly welcomes; but it also shares a similar structure of sensibility concerning the inward cultivation of the self, one also present in the work of Nietzsche and Foucault. Whilst both these thinkers set themselves the task of thinking ethics outside the strictures of a universal morality, both, nevertheless, understood the place of self-cultivation and an affirmative 'faith' in overcoming limitations involved in any ethical discourse (2002b: 119-28, 146-51).

If, then, Connolly's exploration of the Augustinian imperative is designed to critique the tradition—be it secular or religious—of 'smooth morality' and its vilifying hostility towards those who transgress the moral law, nevertheless it is true that he also retains a sympathy for the language of religiosity or, better, the ethical programme of facing up to the sources of diremption within us—or what Connolly calls the 'rift in being'—that Augustine powerfully explores. This characteristically post-secular orientation has an important bearing on how he goes on to develop his approach to pluralism.

Between Nihilism and Pluralism

If we fast forward twelve years from the original publication of The Augustinian Imperative, however, we find Connolly turning directly to the theme of evil following the terrorist atrocities in the US of 2001 (see Connolly, 2005b). This piece also appeared, in revised form, as the opening chapter (titled 'Pluralism and Evil') to his Pluralism (Connolly, 2005a). Connolly now revisits his thesis of an Augustine imperative, this time in relation to Islamicist terrorism and the theological moralizing that has accompanied it. In this text, explicitly devoted to the question of evil, Connolly no longer treats evil merely as the attribution of responsibility for transgressions against an authoritative moral order. Rather, evil is regarded as an ever-present temptation on the part of those who hold to any faith (secular or religious), a temptation to 'take revenge' against the faith of others regarded as subversive or inferior. Describing this as 'the tendency to evil within faith', Connolly now employs the term not merely to describe the repertoire of fundamentalist discourse but also as a legitimate descriptor in itself, openly accepting that the language of evil can be deployed in such a way as 'to retain the sense of suffering and despair attached to the word, while pulling it away from necessary attachment' to ideas of 'a commanding

God, free will and primordial guilt' (2005b: 138). That way, he hopes, it might be possible to realign the term evil to the defence, rather than the subversion, of pluralism, relocating it in an expanded, non-theological sense of faith and religiosity.

Once more, then, Connolly's response to the Augustinian imperative is not the secular reaction that denounces religious discourse as such but, rather, he undertakes to step closer to the world of religious faith, to explore its internal structure and tensions. 'To be human' he argues 'is to be inhabited by existential faith' (2005b: 139). All human experience is relayed through explicit belief systems but also by visceral, embodied investments that exceed the tight rationality of mere 'belief'. Whether we are explicitly religious or not, we are all prone to the disruptive effects such investments produce when challenged or dislodged. To allay the temptation to undertake acts of violent revenge (that is, to practice evil, to enact it upon others) Connolly advises a 'hesitation' within faith rather than a 'universal' morality over and above it. That is, he invites a certain degree of reflectivity that does not undo the complex knots of faith so much as loosens them sufficiently to negotiate a world filled with other kinds of believers.

Whilst we may debate the terms of Connolly's proposed resolution to inter-faith conflicts and their place in sustaining pluralism, what is noticeable here is the characterisation of evil that this text brings to his discussion. For evil is not now for Connolly the transgression of a pre-defined, wholly incontestable moral order. Rather, it designates what we might define as a destructive nihilism, that is, the enforced withdrawal of its victims from an open horizon of being by the imposed negation of difference. For instance, reflecting on the 9/11 attacks, Connolly paints a startling picture of how the perpetration of evil undertakes a negation of one's world:

Evil surprises; it liquidates sedimented habits of moral trust; it foments categorical uncertainty; it issues in a fervent desire to restore closure to a dirempted world; and it generates imperious demands to take revenge on the guilty parties. When you experience evil, the bottom falls out of your stomach because it has fallen out of your world (Connolly, 2005: 133).

Evil negates your world, it hollows out the guts of your being; it leaves you empty, uncertain, and disoriented. This is no longer the theological evil attributing responsibility for moral transgression but evil conceived as annihilation, the negation of existence. But here Connolly has begun to approach the work of others writing in a post-Nietzschean tradition for whom evil can be translated as a denial or annihilation of being. This notion still shares with Augustine the sense of a deprivation, not of a transcendent God but, rather, of a world of infinite possibilities.

Although, on occasion, Connolly disputes the insights of philosophers such as Heidegger—for whom being is conceived as a fundamental 'openness', the 'dwelling' in a meaningful 'world' (see Heidegger, 1993: 252)—his own efforts to describe evil as the collapse of 'your world' nevertheless parallel some of the latter's concerns. In his 'Letter on Humanism', for instance, where Heidegger rejects the reduction of Being (now capitalised) to the qualities of specific beings—refusing the association of his philosophy with 'humanism'—he refers in passing to evil as a capacity for 'nihiliation', a negating power proper to Being as such. Distinguishing evil from the 'mere baseness of human action', Heidegger describes it instead as the 'malice of

rage' or as 'the compulsion to malignancy' that is one of the essential possibilities available to human existence (Heidegger, 1993: 260, 261) and not a perversion of some fixed ontological structure.

The 'openness to Being' by which Heidegger characterises existence is simultaneously a propensity to enact a closure, to fend off or forget the terrifying 'abyssal' ground that appears when we bring ourselves to question Being. In his Introduction to Metaphysics, Heidegger refers to the 'demonic' and 'destructively evil' character of modern America and Russia where metaphysical cultures had 'disempowered' the spirit that opens up to Being (Heidegger, 2000: 47-9). Let us set aside, if we may, the reactionary conservatism that informs Heidegger's text (and which led him, momentarily, to utterly misperceive the malicious rage of Nazism). Evil, he suggests in both instances, denotes a particularly virulent, destructive form of closure to the possibilities of Being, a 'darkening of the world'. In a similar vein, as part of his elaboration of freedom as a constitutive dimension of human existence, the French Heideggerian, Jean-Luc Nancy, argues that 'the possibility of evil ... is correlative to the introduction of freedom'. Here, freedom is not a civil right or a subjective choice but an ineliminable precondition of any existence:

This means that freedom cannot present itself without presenting the possibility, inscribed in its essence, of a free renunciation of freedom. This very renunciation makes itself known as wickedness [I]nsccribing freedom in being amounts to raising to the level of ontology the positive possibility—and not through deficiency—of evil as much as of good ... (Nancy, 1993: 16-17. Italics in original).

Where Connolly talks of the properties of 'faith' and a tendency to evil in the form of revenge, and Heidegger refers to 'Being' and to evil as nihilation and the 'malice of rage', Nancy refers to the 'free renunciation of freedom' as the very possibility of freedom itself. Evil, wickedness, rage, malice: these are the marks not of a 'deformed liberty' that perverts an original purity, as in Augustine, but a possibility for traumatic closure that haunts all beings by virtue of their ontological freedom, a capacity to shut out the light in the aperture to the world that we are as beings. Acts of evil, in this sense, so often reduce us to mere bodies, to organisms at the limits of sheer survival, unable to project ourselves towards a world of open possibilities. Connolly's intimation of a non-theological conception of evil, already pre-figured in Why I am Not a Secularist, follows a similar line of reasoning. Evil serves to denote the negation of the possibilities for being rather than moral corruption: it is the urge to renounce the freedom to be otherwise than we are that, perhaps inevitably, human beings experience in their conflicts with others, and that seals off plurality and the generosity towards difference that a pluralistic culture should cultivate.

It is in light of this propensity for nihilistic 'evil within faith' that Connolly underscores the need for different 'existential faiths' to stave off the worst excesses of metaphysical closure if pluralism is to thrive. Thus he calls for a 'double-entry orientation' of faiths to themselves, calling to anyone with belief to 'honor the terms of your faith, while acknowledging its contestability in the eyes of others' (Connolly, 2005b: 143). This eloquent message, delivered in the first-person address common to religious discourse, makes a direct appeal to subjects of faith for whom belief is a matter of deep personal commitment. As an ethical demand for generosity, however,

it amounts, effectively, to an injunction to ‘think twice’ before insisting on the automatic primacy of one’s own moral standards. Such a demand is hardly unreasonable but does it concede too much to those who might virulently oppose a radical pluralism such as to render impossible a wider culture of generosity? Is Connolly not inviting participants in western democracies to adopt an unlikely ‘holding pattern’ on the basis of an optimistic hope that we might eventually get used to avoiding the violent clashes of faith? Is this not perhaps more likely to stimulate a retrenchment of difference into a condition of bare, snarling tolerance as opposed to an ethos of active engagement?

Perhaps the problem here is that Connolly is addressing subjects primarily as bearers of faith, that is, as participants in an interiorised narrative of the ‘soul’ with its distinctive dramas and commitments. His aim, of course, is to explore the unevenness of that interiority, yet this only partially disrupts the Platonic harmonisation of the soul and the city that Augustine and other monotheistic arguments seek. A pluralistic ethos is sought but still in direct conversation with the soul as if this were the privileged site of ethical generosity. But, as Stuart Hampshire argued in his Justice as Conflict (1999), rather than reasoning from the interiority of the soul—with its tendency to ‘pure’ and ‘universal’ principles—we ought to recognise, too, the impact of public practices and procedures of conflict and argumentation in shaping our ethical dispositions towards each other. Our internal life, he suggests, is as much (if not more) a product of public habits and customs as it is of its own, deeper deliberations and questions. To the Platonic image of harmony Hampshire proffers the ‘Heraclitean picture’:

[E]very soul is always the scene of conflicting tendencies and divided aims and ambivalences, and correspondingly, our political enmities in the city or the state will never come to an end while we have diverse life stories and diverse imaginations (Hampshire, 1999: 19).

Connolly would surely agree with the Heraclitean picture of the soul. But for Hampshire, expanding that logic in a liberal society demands we direct ourselves to the institutionalisation of adversarial procedures so as to normalise conflict between rival points of view (see Hampshire, 1999: 40-51). Such an orientation (moving from an emphasis on the divided soul’s deliberation with itself to an emphasis on the divided city’s public deliberations) demands what Hampshire calls a ‘moral conversion’ (1999: 40) that reframes how we conceptualise virtue and justice. It requires us to address citizens not simply as subjects of faith but, rather, as subjects of political disputation and contest. A pluralist ethos, then, might better be conceived as the result not of subjects thinking twice so much as of institutions and practices that expose them to alternative and competing points of view. For this to come about, however, we need to do more than merely stay the propensity for evil. We need a narrative that motivates us to engage others as adversaries; one which transforms the tendency to nihilate others into a common aversion to our own silencing.

Beyond Evil

Certainly there are available alternative accounts of how to cultivate radical pluralism which argue a stronger line on the cultivation of a common political culture, rather than an ethos of engagement. The Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, for instance,

has argued in favour of a ‘post-modern’ outlook on emancipation by developing the theme of nihilism (see Vattimo, 2004). For him, nihilism is not simply a ‘destructive’ condition of negation but implies a wider situation concerning the end of modernity in the West. Drawing upon Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo understands nihilism as a loss of transcendent authority—‘the dissolution of any ultimate foundation’ (Vattimo, 2004: xxv)—that leads to the generalisation of a ‘hermeneutic’ imperative: there is no single Truth, only interpretations (see Vattimo, 1997). The loss of authority for Reason, Science and Religion—the central feature of modern culture, he argues—constitutes, in his view, a pervasive experience of nihilism, for which metaphysical constructs are revealed as merely transient creations. For him, this is the very precondition for an emancipatory politics.

Whilst Vattimo is likely to concur with Connolly that pluralism demands a generosity and dialogue among faiths—and, perhaps paradoxically, Vattimo remains a committed Christian, albeit of a post-modern sort—the logic of his argument is to insist on the shared, if uneven, sense of this loss of foundation as a common nihilistic sensibility. In this respect, a generous pluralism can be cultivated, not simply as a withdrawal from the hard-line metaphysical certainties inspired by our faiths, but by an awareness of the ‘overcoming’ of metaphysics in which we are all (at least in the West) implicated. That is to say, pluralism is intrinsically bound up with a common narrative describing the loss of a transcendent authority to all our judgements. Interestingly, Vattimo regards that narrative as inspired by a distinctively Judeo-Christian message concerning the human source of all things Divine. Christianity, for Vattimo at least, directly prefigures a post-metaphysical culture in which dialogue, generosity and forbearance are themselves cardinal virtues (see Vattimo, 2002; Vattimo and Rorty, 2005).

Vattimo’s effort to narrativise nihilism, as the story of our age, is given a different twist in the work of Laclau and Mouffe. In their work, both separately and together, radical pluralism is also conceived in relation to a central narrative, to which they refer with the term ‘hegemony’ (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). If Vattimo identifies emancipation, generally-speaking, with the decline of universal foundations conceived as kind of cultural condition, Laclau and Mouffe develop a more strategic account in which pluralism depends upon a hegemonic culture that assembles a common set of values over which we conflict. It is this sense of antagonism that acts as a negative centre (see Laclau, 1996) to a plurality of struggles, unifying them into a precarious but universalising order. Here, then, nihilism is figured as a series of mutual enemies (for instance inequality, injustice, racism, and so forth) which are strategically conjoined.

It is this centrality of a hegemonic narrative to a pluralist project that characterises Chantal Mouffe’s ‘agonistic’ democratic theory, which parallels much of Hampshire’s concerns (see Mouffe, 1993; 2000). In her account, a radical democratic space is constituted, like all political space, through the political division between antagonists of varying degrees of intensity. In disputing the necessity of ‘rational consensus’ as the basis of a democratic community, Mouffe underlines the importance of a framework of contested values over which different groups take up adversarial positions. This agonistic framework can only ever be a temporary consensus, a hegemonic construction that assembles opponents around a shared agenda. The precondition for a democratic pluralism, then, is less an ethical disposition of

generosity towards different systems of belief than a capacity to stage conflicts in a way that we can successfully distinguish adversaries from antagonists, disputants from outright enemies.

Although they share many of the presuppositions as Connolly—not least a rejection of the aspiration to a rational consensus and the longing for philosophical foundations, plus an awareness of the multiple character of subjectivity—Vattimo and Laclau/Mouffe develop their own approaches to radical pluralism by reconfiguring the negative experience of nihilism via ‘strong’ narratives designed to pull difference into closer alignment than does Connolly’s pluralist ethos. In very different ways, the potential for evil is therefore transformed into a more integrative outlook which demands institutions and practices of mutual questioning and deliberation over contrasting points of view. For Vattimo, this comes in a shared experience of the loss of foundations that places social differences in, at least minimally, a ‘cultural’ proximity such that different interpretations come into a common conversation. For Laclau and Mouffe, it is the pull of antagonism that brings adversaries into a shared, but contested, political space where differences are open to rearticulation. For each, however, it is necessary, in order to avoid the worst excesses of nihilistic behaviour, to reconfigure their negativity into a positive, unifying narrative rather than neutralise nihilistic impulses through a shared ethos.

Where Connolly directs his attention to an ethos that speaks to but does not seek radically to dislocate subjects of faith, instead teasing them out from their bunkers, Laclau/Mouffe and Vattimo take a more robust approach, defining more explicitly the terms of pluralist engagement among subjects of a post-metaphysical culture (Vattimo) or a radical and plural democratic politics (Laclau/Mouffe). Put another way, Connolly defends pluralism by warding off evil spirits, guarding difference through an injunction to ‘think twice’. Laclau, Mouffe and Vattimo, on the other hand, defend pluralism by transfiguring the potential for evil itself into a kind of good.

Of course, the cost of accentuating the negative in these strong narratives is, inevitably, the placing of limits on pluralism. If a pluralist democratic culture is bound up with a unifying narrative that transforms the negativity of nihilism into the positivity of common spaces of engagement, then that plurality is nevertheless restricted to the (hegemonic, post-metaphysical) terms of those spaces. Less interested in exploring the ‘paradoxes’ of difference outside such space, Vattimo and Mouffe are consequently less ‘generous’ to potential opponents of pluralism than is Connolly: Mouffe explicitly repudiates efforts at ‘ethical’ approaches to politics that, in her view, ‘do not emphasize enough the need to put some limits to pluralism’ (Mouffe, 2000: 134) and, in turn, she underlines the potentially ‘dis-associative’ and openly hostile character of political subjects. Vattimo, on the other hand, is less pessimistic about ethical engagements, but even he suggests we ‘translate our ethical precepts ... into the language of the overcoming of metaphysics as oblivion of Being’, with the idea of ‘sin’ being recast as the ‘fall into metaphysics’ (Vattimo, 2004: 69, 68). For those who refuse to renounce their own metaphysical certainties, Mouffe’s and Vattimo’s narratives are likely to be seen more as a provocation to adversarial conflict than a polite invitation to a dialogue that respects the integrity of faith.

Conclusion

In appropriating a non-theological concept of evil, Connolly has sought carefully to side-step the type of divisive ‘command morality’ that President Bush invoked with his designation of an ‘axis of evil’, whilst acknowledging the terrible damage that extremist violence (of any kind) can cause. In this, his post-secular style of reasoning has proved a unique and productive resource, permitting him to explore the tragic psychic dramas that motivate such violence, as well as the ressentiment it stimulates among its victims. To address both constituencies without automatically pitting the one against the other in some faux civilisational ‘clash’ is an impressive feat for which Connolly justly deserves praise. The destructive nihilism he invokes with his use of ‘evil’ is undoubtedly a possibility even (especially?) for the most righteous among us, and doubtless a pluralist culture would do well to develop antennae sensitive to its signals.

But it remains questionable how much a commitment to a radical pluralism requires the danger of destructive nihilism to be transposed into a common narrative of concern, one that defines in strong terms specific values of public engagement and which supports a more adversarial politics. As I have suggested above, in all likelihood such a narrative will set limits to the ethos of generosity among contrasting faiths that Connolly invites us to explore outside of any ‘strong’ assemblage of values. The price of successfully expounding a pluralist faith, then, may well be the redrawing of the axis of evil rather than its total erasure.

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