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Dialogue with Evil

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DIALOGUE WITH EVIL

This paper is a direct result of comments Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon gave me on one of my previous papers. I have been exploring possible implications of Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of dialogue and polyphony for educational theory. The assumption I borrowed from Bakhtin is that dialogue is the end and everything else in a means. In other words, Bakhtin seemed to reject any absolutes with the exception of dialogical relation. I thought, and still do now, that this is a very productive idea, and that dialogue understood as a relation can effectively describe something very central to human existence. Among other things, I suggested that education must foster a student's ability to hear a multitude of human voices, and maintain internal dialogue. To do this, one must develop an ability not only to attend to the other in dialogue, but also to maintain and strengthen the other's argument. To maintain an ability of moral judgement, one has to keep one's enemy very much alive, both as a viable partner of dialogue, and as an internal voice within.

Dr. Thayer-Bacon raised a question about a possibility and desirability of dialogue with evil:

> "So we need to maintain and strengthen skinheads, because they have some truth to them, and we will learn more about ourselves and gain greater meaning, by dialoging with skinheads, then by showing them false? […] I would say, yes, you need to talk to the skinheads, but I would not say you need to strengthen their positions, there are many [other] people we can talk to gain greater understanding. The problem with the skinheads that makes them so dangerous is their unwillingness to recognize the need to dialogue. So what do you do with that?"[1]

In other words, Dr. Thayer-Bacon asked how far I am willing to go with dialogue, and whether some intrinsic limitations appear when dealing not just with another interlocutor, but with people we perceive to be evil. The question leads to several related questions: Should one attempt to enter dialogue with evil? If yes, on what terms and for what purpose? Can one have dialogue with evil without compromising one's moral self? How can dialogue be possible if evil side does not want to enter it?

It is not my intention to explore the concept of evil in great detail, just because it is a tremendously complex problem, and too many important thinkers have dealt with it. To sketch out a general framework, I will use Andrew Delbanco's *The Death of Satan*.[2] He starts out with two opposite concepts of evil, Manichean and Augustinian. Manichean idea is an embodied, focused evil, evil of specific person, a mythical being such as Satan, or of specific groups of people. St. Augustine introduced an idea of evil as privation, as absence of the divine. Delbanco offers historical analysis of cultural representations of evil throughout much of American history and remains a supporter of the Augustinian concept. He paints broad picture of different incarnations of Satan marching through American history. The conclusion is quite compelling. Every time the Manichean concept of evil takes hold in America, its culture turns xenophobic and paranoid.

For the purposes of this paper, I will accept Augustinian concept, with one correction: evil is privation, but not of the divine presence. Evil is ultimate monologue, or absence of dialogical relation. "[T]he crusader who construes evil as malignant, external thing—a thing alien to himself—is by far worst kind of barbarian. The struggle of the twentieth century was to keep this proficient hater from seizing the world."[3] To put it simply, one becomes evil when one takes someone else to be a complete evil beyond a possibility of relation. In other words, when one

shuts down a possibility of communication with those who one considers evil, at his moment one becomes evil. Evil is absence of relation, an inability or unwillingness to relate to another human being. Evil is objectifying the other, taking an utterly monological stance toward the other. This, I believe, is an elemental cell of evil that proliferates into a multitude of cancerous cells of hatred, prejudice, indifference, and violence.

What my relation to evil should be if I do not want to become one myself? A simple answer, which has been my assumption for some time, is that one needs to attempt a dialogue with evil. However, complications of such a position are great, and I will try to resolve at least some of them.

Explaining Hitler by Ron Rosenbaum[4] began as a book about Hitler, but then turned into a book about Hitler explainers. I find the descriptions of how different strategies of dealing with evil turn out fascinating. One thing Rosenbaum makes clear at the beginning of his book is this: "the search for Hitler, the search to find coherence in the fragmentary surviving evidence, frequently led to a kind of searching *self*-examination, a reassessment of world history *and* of personal history."[5] This may sound like a platitude in our day and age, when subjectivity of all knowledge is widely acknowledged and recognized. However, it is different when you think of Hitler. A temptation to cast away evil is so great; it may blind us to the fact that our relationships with evil so intricately tied to our relations to ourselves. The further one goes into the book meeting all the heroes of Rosenbaum's book one by one, the greater is the temptation to never go near Hitler and the likes of him. Thus the fear of evil sets in. Indeed, one lesson of Rosenbaum's account is abundantly clear – researching Hitler is a dangerous enterprise; our fear is well grounded.

One sad illustration of this danger is the story of an English historian David Irving. Irving began as a Hitler's biographer and then turned into a Hitler's defender, and subsequently, into a Holocaust denier (conditional denier, but still a denier). His research curiosity brought him inside of what he calls "the Magic Circle" of surviving former Hitler confidants. "Once inside that Magic Circle, he encountered—he became a living example of—the continuing power of Hitler spell."[6] One can imagine how Irving was trying to get close to understandably frightened and not forthcoming world of Hitler's secretaries and adjutants. To gain their confidence, he had to like those people; to like them, he had to share their love for Führer. Then come the explanations, how is it "to find twenty five people of education, all of whom privately spoke well of him."[7] With a touch of disbelief, Rosenbaum reports Irving's findings that Hitler was well loved by children and dogs. He wonders how Irving's judgement became so blurred.

This story makes so much sense. In an effort to understand, to have a dialogue with someone, you must make certain compromises, and then more compromises. Finally, you become much like the one you are trying to explain. This is one of points clearly in support of Dr. Thayer-Bacon's doubts. Does not dialogue imply some sort of empathy with the other party? Does not empathy with evil equal to endorsement of evil?

Before I answer to this question, let us consider alternatives. A very different story Ron Rosenbaum tells us is one of Claude Lanzman, the author of a well regarded Holocaust documentary *Shoah*. This is an example of another particular strategy in dealing with evil. Again, with some uneasiness Rosenbaum shows how dangerous an attempt to deal with evil may be. In his view, Lanzman becomes just as morally corrupt as Irving. He illustrates this point with a detailed account of public attack Lanzman undertook against a Holocaust survivor who failed to understand Lanzman's film. A few other personal details portray Lanzman as imposing,

authoritarian, uncaring individual. However, his strategy in dealing with evil consists of enforcing a ban against any explanation. Lanzman strongly believes that explaining evil is forgiving. "And if you start to explain and to answer the question of Why, – he says, – *you are led, whether you want it or not, to justification.* The question as such shows it its own obscenity: Why are the Jews being killed? Because there is no answer to the question of why."[8] Lanzman's maxim is "There is no why here" —"Hier ist keine warum." Curiously, he borrows this phrase from a Holocaust survivor quoting an SS guard who explained to prisoners the rules of life at a concentration camp. Lanzman chooses the words of his worst enemy to describe (or, rather, prescribe) a strategy of dealing with evil of the Holocaust.

This problem of whether understanding is forgiving is central for Rosenbaum himself, and he never resolves it. Nevertheless, he comments that from his point of view "Lanzman leaps from epistemological inadequacy of explanation to condemning the *moral* inadequacy of those who try to explain."[9] I am not sure if such an objection is convincing. However unpleasant Lanzman's manners are, he makes a valid point. One cannot keep one's epistemology and ethics separate. To make an assumption that such an ultimate evil as Holocaust can be explained in a sense that certain causes can be attributed to it is to take a degree of responsibility off the perpetrator.

Having said all this, I do not endorse Lanzman's solution, simply because he does not have one. Making a valid criticism of a particular epistemology does not yet make a positive epistemology. If we are to apply Lanzman's own charge to his own method, it becomes clear that *refusal* to understand, just like an effort to understand, has its own moral implications. Keeping far apart from evil makes it mysterious, inexplicable, and thus all-powerful. OK, there is no why there, but how can I live with that? What can one possibly do to avoid another Holocaust? Moreover, not only ethical and moral position of Lanzman is questionable. His avoidance of evil surely affected his own moral self, if we believe Rosenbaum's story. Lanzman's position is just as corrupt as Irving's is, although they have chosen opposite strategies of dealing with evil. If you get too close, you may get attached to it. If you stay too far away, you do not really know it, and you may miss a moment when it becomes you.

I choose another story from Rosenbaum's book to illustrate what I would call a dialogical stance towards evil, a stance that avoids the dangers of proximity. Rosenbaum himself is quite uneasy about this strange story that he calls "A Frankenstein story: about a frightening creation that escaped from its creator. The creator is George Steiner, one of the foremost men of letters in the English-speaking world. His creation: a fictive character called "A.H." who is transparently Adolf Hitler."[10] Steiner's novel *the Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* sparked intense controversy. Steiner, essentially, brought Hitler back to life using literary imagination. When he saw his creation for the first time on a stage, he was simply scared: "Until then, his Hitler was just the barest of initials on a page. Now, suddenly, "A.H." was a charismatic, full-bodied, full-blooded figure bestriding the stage, mesmerizing an audience with words of self-justification Steiner put in his mouth."[11]Steiner neither tried to explain Hitler, nor he avoided an explanation. He did something entirely different; he entered a dialogue with Hitler.

Rosenbaum repeatedly laments that it seems to be impossible to explain Hitler, no matter what are the approaches of doing so (there are many more attempts of explanation described in his book than I mentioned). "How do you explain a person anyway?" – asks Emil Fackenheim, one of Rosenbaum's interlocutors. Unfortunately, he never pursues this question that seem to be of high importance to me. Yet explaining someone is not the same as understanding. One cannot

possibly explain another, and one cannot understand with the help of explanation. Understanding of another human being is only possible as a process of dialogue. Steiner's Hitler had to explain himself. The problem is that he explained himself too well. Explanation connotes with describing from outside, with making things plain, with identifying causes, contributing factors, with figuring out why. Dialogical understanding is relating to Thou, is addressing directly to that who one is trying to understand. I refer to Martin Buber's *I and Thou* for a succinct characterization of difference between I-It and I-Thou relations.

I willnow use writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, who, unlike Rosenbaum, was very much interested in the question of human inexplicability. He wrote that certain aspect of human being always escapes explanation. While Rosenbaum thinks that only "larger than life" historical figures, like Jesus and Hitler, may not be fully explainable,[12] for Bakhtin, no one is fully explainable. Moreover, he places this part of us that is unpredictable and unexplainable, to the very core of human existence. Whatever is not definable is exactly what defines us.

> "A man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity A=A. In Dostoevsky's artistic thinking, the genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a man and himself, at his point of departure beyond the limits of all that he is as a material being, a being that can be spied on, defined, predicted apart from its own will, "at second hand." The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself.
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> The truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a *lie* degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his "holy of holies," that is, "the man in man."[13]

Bakhtin contrasts two Russian writers to emphasize the point. He describes Gogol's *Overcoat* as a description of a clerk. It is a vivid, detailed, and a convincing description. However, Dostoevsky's hero Devushkin is a clerk who read the *Overcoat,* who had recognized himself and is outraged. "He felt himself to be hopelessly predetermined and finished off, as if he were already quite dead, yet at the same time he sensed the falseness of such an approach."[14] Such objectifying approach is not only morally deficient, but also unproductive. "*In a human being, —* writes Bakhtin, *—there is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition.*"[15]

If we are accessible to each other only through the sphere of dialogical, then this is the only way to confront evil. And as I have already argued, to avoid dealing with evil is to invite it in. I must point out though, that dialogue is not empathy, and does not imply love or sympathy. What it does imply though, is giving the other a full voice, it is taking ones' opponent very seriously. Dostoevsky could serve as an example in this respect. In his novels, evil thoughts are shown from inside, and spoken through full voice of their bearers. His villains are extremely articulate, willing to engage into conversations, and do not seem to be evil to them. The voice of Dostoevsky is not absent from his novel, but it is given the same rights of presence as those of his heroes. He, just like Steiner, was not afraid.

What happens in our lives though, is that we do not take our opponents seriously, justifying it by the fact that they do not want to talk to us. Dr. Thayer-Bacon was quite right that skinheads are not interested in dialogue, and this is why they are so dangerous. And even if they did want to

talk to us, racists are normally not half as educated and articulate as university professors. They simply cannot sustain the level of dialogue we find interesting. So, instead of using our imagination to construct a stronger version of them, we walk away. Yet I contend that it is very easy to win an argument with intellectually weak opponent, and the value of such victory is low. It is easy to argue with dead Hitler, but immeasurably more difficult to argue with alive one. We must treat Hitler in a discourse that, according to Bakhtin, "is organized as a discourse about *someone actually present*, someone who hears him (the author) and *is capable of answering him."*[16] For our moral victories to count, we should struggle with a strongest version of evil possible, even if for that we have to invent it, or to bring it back from the dead.

I understand that this is a very hard step to take. For a victim of oppression, it is hard if impossible to enter a dialogue with an oppressor. An African American may have no desire to talk to a white supremacist. A hate crime victim may not be able to enter inner world of his or her torturer. I would not insist that a Holocaust survivor engage in a dialogue with the Nazis. Some wounds are too deep to heal, and some gaps are too wide to bridge. In many circumstances, one's survival is more important than the sort of battle with evil through dialogue I argue for. Nevertheless, history shows that oppressed often become oppressors, and that real victims of evil sometimes become perpetrators of it. The hard truth is that being a victim does not reduce chances of becoming a victimizer. For an individual, it may not always be feasible to seek dialogical confrontations with evil. For whole groups of people it is a necessity.

But why bother? Why imagine, reanimate, and impersonate our enemies, if we are not even talking too real people? Skinheads are not going to change if I talk to an imagined, stronger, more intellectual skinhead. My answer would be that in our relations with evil, the most important victory is an internal one. There are times when one has to fight physically or politically with evil without regard for a dialogical confrontation. However, any such victory is only superficial, and does not last. In a very real sense, one cannot physically eliminate evil; one has to learn to confront it within. Maybe because so few people are willing to do what Steiner did, namely, to resurrect Hitler in order to confront him, – maybe because of that there still exist what Rosenbaum calls "the continuing power of the Hitler spell."[17] Amidst all the attention brought by controversy surrounding Steiner's novel, he does not hear answers to what his Hitler had to say. In certain sense, the Second World War is not over, since very few people have let Nazis state their case and have truly responded to them.

Sometimes I think about my grandfather who I have never met, because he perished in snowfields around Leningrad in 1944. What would he and countless others want of me? I do not think he wanted me become like him. Rather, he wanted me to not become like his enemy. For a war to make any sense there needs to be a continuation of dialogue with evil, a dialogue that would prevent it from returning. And when in early eighties, just before the Perestroika, Soviet society was gradually moving towards fascism, I almost failed him. It happened because as a nation we did not then come to terms with the fact of kinship we have with our epic enemy, the German Nazism.

The same applies to many aspects of American history. A political battle against segregation is over, but the whole war is hardly won, because racism was never really heard, and therefore still exists in the minds and hearts of millions. A battle for women's reproductive rights has been going on for many, yet a true dialogue between the sides never existed.

Violence or direct political coercion directed to evil, no matter how justified, is senseless unless

one sees a connection between the external evil and one's own psyche. The connection between one's psyche and one's perception of evil has been discussed extensively in psychoanalytic literature. Carl Jung stated this idea with great precision: "Anything that disappears from your psychological inventory is apt to turn up in the guise of a hostile neighbor, who will inevitably arouse your anger and make you aggressive."[18] This is why we take challenge of evil one step further, when we create it in our imagination, this is when we really confront evil. Evil is like us and it is us.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl explicates this general idea with great detail and precision in her *The Anatomy of Prejudices.*[19] She offers her critique of pure overgeneralization of prejudices. There is no one kind of prejudice, as there is no "prejudiced personality." Instead, a number of prejudices associate each with its own character type. Hysterics, obsessionals, and narcissists each produce their own particular kind of evil. What is important for me here, is realization that same sort of experiences that form one or the other type of prejudice, are common to everyone else. In other words, we all have elements of prejudice within our psyche. When I say "evil is like us" I do not mean that people who we perceive as undoubtedly evil, share with us many common human qualities. Rather, I want to emphasize that we all posses many of the qualities that make them monsters. The similarity is not in our humanity, but in our monstrosity. One of the main reasons we are afraid to deal with evil is precisely this: in a fierce racist's personality we recognize our own little demons of hysterical desire. In an anti-Semite, we read our own obsessions. A sexist resonates with our own narcissistic side.

Dialogue with evil is possible only if it has an inner component, directed to one's own self. In order to address the other fully as Thou, one has to have a way of connecting the other with resources of one's inner self. For imagined Hitler to come across truly alive, Steiner had to explore his own internal Hitler. This may strike as a too grand of an example. Yet consider a teacher who cannot understand his student's aggression mainly because he does not understand his own aggression. In order for me to create a racist, for example, as a partner in dialogue, I need to draw on my own resources, so that he comes out convincingly strong. The only way to do it is to find a racist within me, in my subconsciously motivated actions, my dreams, my anxieties. This may strike as a dangerous game to play; yet I maintain, all the other strategies of dealing with evil are more dangerous.

This works the other way as well. One cannot deal with one's own inner problems unless somebody else is involved as a partner in dialogue. To simplify greatly, one cannot recognize one's own prejudice unless some other person with a more profound case of same prejudice is involved. I will argue that prejudices spread and strengthen when their most outspoken bearers are marginalized, and pushed outside the main public discourse.

If I may generalize broadly, the problem with psychoanalysis is its in assumption that the subconscious is ultimately beyond reach. With id, we cannot have anything resembling dialogue. I am not implying that what Freud has come to call the subconscious, is identical to evil. Rather, our relations with evil and our ability to deal with evil in others and in ourselves are intricately connected to mysterious processes inside of our psyche. Many theorists of psychoanalysis seem to agree on the suggestions that while we may understand what our subconscious tells us, but there is no way of direct communication with it. Id, like a skinhead, does not listen. All we can do is to work around it, trying to accommodate our conscious mind to the powerful and uncontrollable drives of id. If this is true, my project of dialogue with evil may become impossible. I want to propose that the only effective way of dealing with evil is a dialogical

encounter with it. Such an encounter is impossible without sustaining an inner dialogue within the self, which looks questionable in light of psychoanalytic assumptions.

Yet no one denies that one can change relations with one's psyche. The whole thrust of psychoanalysis is toward therapy, toward changing the hidden psychic structures. The strategy that analysts use is not unlike that I propose we use while talking to evil that does not want to talk to us. Just as we can use our imagination to create an opponent, we can create a representation of our subconscious within the limits of our conscious self. The point is, we probably cannot do each of the two processes in isolation. We cannot get through to the other, without accessing our subconscious; yet we also cannot access our subconscious without entering into dialogue with the other. The only thing I want to suggest, is that dialogue with mean others may be in many cases more important for our psyche than dialogue with a nice and understanding therapist.

As with many other issues, bringing the problem of evil into educational realm makes it more visible. At a conference roundtable, a scholar said that she has no desire talking to racists, and sees no point to it. "Would you still want us to talk to their children?" - Charles Bingham, who sat at the same table, replied. While children are not immune to evil, it seems impossible to shut those affected by evil out of the classroom conversation. This would jeopardize the entire educational enterprise. An educator that wants to reduce amount of evil in the world must learn to engage into dialogical relations with what she or he perceives to be evil in students. At the same time, an important educational aim is to introduce students to the world of dialogical relations with other people, not excluding those who the students perceive to be evil.

Afterword

> Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) Monday night fired newly appointed House historian Christina Jeffrey, after it was revealed that she had critiqued a 1986 Department of Education teaching program on the Holocaust, saying that it failed to present the views, "however unpopular," of the Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan. […] In response to inquiries from Gingrich's office Monday night, Jeffrey confirmed that she had authored the program assessment as a volunteer evaluator, according to Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley. She defended her comments as "ambiguous."[20]

1 Barbara Thayer-Bacon, Private correspondence to the author, May 1998.
2 Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).
3 Delbanco, *The Death of Satan*, 183.
4 Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for Origins of his Evil* (NewYork: Random House, 1998).
5 Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 93.
6 Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 227.
7 Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 229.
8 Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 260.
9 Ibid.
[10] Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 300.
[11] Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 301.
[12] Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, xxiv.
[13] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 59
[14] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 58
[15] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,58
[16] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,63
[17] Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, 227.
18 *Jung on Evil*. Selected and Introduced by Murray Stein. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 179.
[19] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
[20] Melissa Healy, "Gingrich Fires House Historian Over Nazi Flap," *The Los Angeles Times*; Los Angeles, Calif.; Jan 10, 1995.