

THE CUNNING OF EVIL. A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO EUGEN DREWERMANN'S CONCEPTION ON EVIL

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Abstract

*This paper explores and describes the way the German theologian and author Eugen Drewermann, which is also a psychotherapist, understands the problem of evil. His main insights are expressed in his 3-volume work *Strukturen des Bösen*, and cover and synthesize contributions from psychoanalysis, history of religions, structuralism, sartrian existential, social philosophy and theology. The problem of evil is not located only in the individual, but has a collective dimension that is also explored by the author. These dimensions of evil are interrelated, impossible to separate. Evil expresses itself as the repeated endeavour of man to provide himself the ontological principle and justification of its own existence that it is as the attempt to become God, as an unlimited will to power. These attempts can be seen in social engineering programs or in endeavours such as the communist revolution, liberalism, and in the striving to impose the so-called social justice in society, regardless of the consequences. The intention to do good or to undo an evil that has been committed has unforeseen consequences for the doer, the end-result being completely opposed to the intent of the action. Hence the cunning of evil terminology.*

Keywords: Drewermann, evil, structures of evil, sin, noology, the cunning of evil.

Introduction

Man is a social being, but also a spiritual one. These two dimensions intertwine, but man's existence is defined by his spirituality, his own self-image and *Weltanschauung*. Since he cannot exist like an animal does, he has to build himself an image of existence, of its meaning, of evil, of good, etc. Though one may speak about man, he exists only in particular ways, a fact that modern philosophy and current social and political ideals try to ignore or even hide.

Modernity views man in an abstract generic way, devoid of any real features, as if man can be made a member of a utopian society, where there are no borders, no conflict, and so on. In reality there is no such thing as a generic human, a human devoid of all characteristics, of language, history, community. Man does not exist in himself, it is not self-subsistence (this is an attribute of God, the only being existing through himself), so it is not substance in the ancient meaning of this term. Man is not given in or as an abstract nature, but only in concrete forms or as *henipostasis*, as the eastern Fathers of the Church affirm. This peculiar concept seeks to affirm that the common nature of man, in this case, is always expressed in particular and

concrete forms, not being accessible otherwise, somehow akin to the Hegelian concept of a universal that is given only through an individual. That is the difference is also not reducible to the abstract universal essence. Difference and multiplicity are real and are not masks for an abstract impersonal nature that shines through them and discards them as mere illusory. The difference does not melt away in universality. That does not imply that man is just an individual, an atomistic *in sich geschlossene Einheit*, so self-closed and auto-referential atomistic monad, as liberal and materialistic points of view do wish to be the case. Human existence is particular, social, personal, and also spiritual. It entails a noological dimension that modernity seeks to eradicate. This noological dimension expresses itself in many things, in literature, myth, symbols, religion, etc. These spiritual creations can confer universality to a human community with a limited and localized existence in space and time. Many of these spiritual products do acquire it. Narratives, myths, etc. The Bible is a paradigmatic example in this sense. One of the foremost problems which spirituality encounters is the problem of evil. The noological dimension is not something that pertains to fancy works of art, or literature or metaphysical speculations, but it pertains to problems that affect human communities every day, suffering, death, evil, etc. Evil is in a sense the paradigmatic spiritual problem for man, and is tethered to the everyday life of anyone. It affects both the individual and the common dimension of human existence. The Bible gives insights in this particular troubling question, insights that are universal, although they were expressed by a particular people in a particular and limited corner of the world. The Biblical vision had become common for many people across the world and is the basis of their culture and for a possible or renewed common understanding between them. It still has relevance for the modern world, despite the Enlightenment and the new developments in the former Christian countries.

As already said, evil is a common experience of humanity. The encounter with evil and the attempts to explain it, or at least to make it partially intelligible were for the most part recorded in the symbolic language of myth, fable, allegory, in sacred text and so on. There were also the first philosophical attempts to explain it, which have their root in symbolic and mythical thought, and also more modern ones, who, despite the proffered rationalism and sometime atheism, do still have roots in the ancient thought. Some of these philosophical and systematic attempts to explain evil place it at social level, and tried to offer proposals to remove it. They also have been applied, but they had fostered some types of policies and societies based on those policies, wherein the supposed doing away with evil has furthered evil on and until then unknown scale. Gulags and concentration camps have roots in these modern philosophical attempts to explain evil and in the modern attempts to eliminate evil from society. The problem persisted and still persists, and instead on doing what they set out to do in the first place, they created new escape goats for evil, encompassing social classes or even entire peoples.

The contemporary fight against discrimination and other social justice ideologies/policies do the same thing. They locate evil also in entire categories of

human beings: men, especially white men. These attempts also show that the modern view of man that does not recognize the sinful nature of man is wrong. It also illustrates another feature of evil, which is that evil comes to the fore, or is enacted especially when we think that we found ways to combat it, or we have found the guilty parties and we try to punish them. Such a view of evil is to be found in the Bible. But the biblical vision of evil does not stop here; it also exposes the cause that produced this.

One author that has given an account of the biblical experience of evil, though referring only to some books of the Old Testament, is the German theologian and psychotherapist Eugen Drewermann. An important feature of evil is in this view the fact that, when evil arises, though not always, it arises against the attempts to repair a previous evil or to do good. It is an unintended consequence that produces an opposite result to the intention of the action that produced it in the first place. One may speak here of the cunning of evil in the same manner as Hegel spoke of the cunning of reason, by which an intended action produces unintended results, just opposed to the intentions that originated the action. It is like in old pseudo-dualistic legends when, in the beginning of time, there is God and the devil, and the devil tries to drown God in the surrounding waters while God sleeps on a tiny piece of land. But when the devil tries to drown him, something else entirely happens. The tiny piece of land grows, extends itself in the direction where the devil pushes God towards the water.

Basic presuppositions of biblical thinking

The Bible offers a symbolical and realistic view of evil. It shows, with the help of historical and symbolical meanings, the real situation of man in the world, and his relationship to the Creator of the world, or the ontological principle, and it draws the consequences that come from this situation. The essential narrative for the problem of evil and for the fall of man, which can function as a blueprint for understanding evil in society even today, is comprised of the so-called iahvist books, whereto also the *Book of Genesis* belongs. The fall of man and the exile from Eden are essential for the understanding of the matter at hand, but one cannot stop here. The story of Abel und Cain, the act of building the Tower of Babel, the episode of the intercourse between the heavenly Watchers and human females, the Flood and Noah, *The Song of Lamech*. The fall of man seems to be a continuous process, and also the increase of the remoteness between man and God.

This is one strain of thought from Eugen Drewermann thesis on evil that he elaborated in his 3-volume work *The Structures of Evil – Die Strukturen des Bösen*¹. The way he attacks this problem is not one-sided, but makes use of many disciplines

¹ Eugen Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen*, vol. I-III, Ferdinand Schoening, Paderborn, 1988.

such as theology, comparative mythology and folklore, psychoanalysis, sartrian existential philosophy, which he uses to show how the personal dimension of sin intertwines with its social dimension in a dialectical way, etc. His starting point is the totality of the iahvist narrative, not limiting himself only to the episodes described by *The Book of Genesis*. What all these narratives describe is the gloomy image of mankind, the darkening and closing of the human mind towards God, and the way man loses his original freedom. In this process humanity becomes the prisoner of necessity, being alienated from God, from nature, from himself and from the fellow human being. What the reader finds in these narratives is the true inhumanity of mankind, inhumanity that results from severing its ties to God. This inhumanity is contrasted to the loving care of God's actions toward His people. The inhumanity of human history and the gruesome ways people act toward each other are the tragic consequence of the fall and of the attempt to replace God in the scheme of things, that is in trying to become one's own ontological principle. This attitude of man is also the prime mover of mankind's history and one could detect it behind the modern notion of progress (also in the now published ideas of transhumanism).

These narratives are providing the hermeneutical frame for an adequate understanding of man even for the present situation. This mode of being-in-the-world finds its utmost expression in the creation of the city, which entails its further development, and also the increasing and the deepening of the bond-break with God².

One further negative development of this ontological situation is epitomized by the city³. The city is foremost a spiritual reality, which affects its anthropological and social dimensions. The city is the product of being exiled from Eden, an exile where man is confronted with a world for which he was not made for. He has no big teeth, no natural armour, no natural weapons, etc. His being and existence will be from that point on characterized by lack, both in an ontological sense and a more mundane one. It is the consequence of Cain's wrong doing and killing⁴ of his sibling. Cain builds the first city, which is called Enoch, just like Cain's son – meaning beginning or initiation. Some authors have even clearly stated that the city is basically what the Bible betokens as power, so a spiritual power. So, the city is associated with a fallen heavenly power.

To lessen the adequate understanding of this vision about evil, the German author explains the difference between Hebraic and Greek/Indo-European thought. They understand and express otherwise such important concepts as beginning, essence, or time. The principle of reality, also in the sense of beginning, is not something that endures behind appearances. The beginning, or the *arhe*, is something to be found in the flux of change itself, it works in it. It is not something that ceases to be, it is not a thing of the past. The story of the Fall of man and his exile is akin to

² Eugen Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen*, vol. I, p. 152.

³ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trad. Dennis Pardee, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2011.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

a report that describes the process of erecting a structure, a house. It is a process that happened, it is still happening, and it can continue to do so, though in the case of sin there is hope that this process might be broken. This process, this beginning is the Hebraic counterpart to the old Greek notion of essence or *ousia*/being.

Describing a beginning is the equivalent of describing the essence in old Greek and today's philosophy:

“Die Beschreibung, wie etwas gemacht wurde, ist also zu verstehen als eine Beschreibung dessen, was etwas in seinem Wesen, in seiner Gestalt ist”⁵.

It is the description of a process which reaches pause, but is still active, and it is not the process of imprinting an archetype onto some inferior matter. What we call being, essence, even reality seems to be something efficient, something that exercises an effect, more akin to the German *Wirklichkeit*. The usual translation of it is reality, but instead of referring to *res*, to things, it relates to *wirken* – cognate of the English to work – which means to act upon, to be efficient and so on.

So, according to Drewermann and to the Hebraic and biblical thought, the iahvist narratives are not a description of what happened at the beginning of creation of man, something that is over. What is reported is still going on. The fall repeats itself in each human being, in each society. What those narratives describe is, speaking in the modern idiom of thought, the very essence of man and his behavior. It is not the description of a historical event in the modern sense. Being made of dust is not a description of the way God created man. It is the depiction of man's way of being in himself, which is without God's working to sustain him. It is the very nature of man from his beginning, a nature that perdures⁶. It is a true description and *zur-Schau-stellen* of the very core of man's being, depiction that uses symbols, myths, metaphors, etc. It describes the real situation of man in the world, of his relationship to God, to himself. The conundrum of evil arises at this joint with God. The events that are presented to belong to the beginning of man's historical existence are depictions of what has always existed and still exists, and will exist.

“Die Mythen der j Urgeschichte sind daher zu verstehen als Urbilder des Menschen, der menschlichen Wirklichkeit in ihren Wesenszügen. Was als Begebenheit der Urzeit erzählt wird, ist Beschreibung dessen, was zu allen Zeiten ist”⁷.

The Bible expresses here a universal truth about human nature. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Nimrod, etc. are, though singular, universal typical figures. Whatever they do or express depict human existence since it cut off its ties to God.

⁵ “The description of the way something comes about to be, has to be understood as being the description of what something is in his essence, in his total configuration” (*Ibidem*, p. XIX).

⁶ Drewermann, *op. cit.*, p. XIX.

⁷ “The myths of the primordial iahvist narratives are hence to be understood as primordial images of man, of human reality in its essential features. Whatever is being narrated as even in primordial times, is the description of the structures that exists anytime.” (*Ibidem*, p. XXVI)

They express the lack of communion with God. These narratives do not tell what happened in *illo tempore* like a myth does. They describe the essence and universal, permanent meaning of a thing, etc. in the old Hebraic sense. The sin, the fall of man is not a thing of the past. This structure-process still exists, and has its origin in a human error; it is not the original situation. The narrative hence implies hope. Still the universal meaning is there. When Saul calls Jonathan as a whore's son (1 Sam 1-2), the whole point is not to insult but to show that rebel and infidel attitude are exemplified by him. Even genealogies or childhood accounts belong to this type of narrations. The saying "that fearing God is the beginning of all wisdom" is such a statement that clearly designates that fearing God is the essence of wisdom. Another expression that carries the same type of meaning is "Abraham's children", which designates a certain kind of relationship between a determinate human group and the Lord. All these statements designate what we may call essence of something, but not in the mythical sense of a happening or an act done in *illo tempore*. Even when there is an etiological dimension, this dimension is not the main feature thereof. It expresses origin but not as a temporal or etiological event that is gone and closed. As already mentioned, Adam and Eve are not just mere historical persons, but also universal types that apply to all men and women in any time. This, remarks Drewermann, is also valid for many surnames in many cultures, and these names are not different from names that designate categories or species. A person or an individual can appear as a species and vice-versa. A historical reality can appear as a symbolical one and gain universal value for everyone, for many peoples around the globe. Hence the biblical narratives acquire universal meaning. The contents of the Bible pertain to the individual person but also to humanity or larger human communities as such. It is a kind of primordial narrative – *eine Urgeschichte*, but not in mythical sense⁸. Mythical images and symbols are used in a non-mythical way, describing the essence of human existence and its main attitudes towards being, God etc. The main import of these statements is theological, not philosophical, because it describes mankind's relationship to God⁹. Each human being can be both Adam or Eve, Cain or Abel, Lamech, Nimrod or Solomon, and so on.

Dialectical biblical understanding of evil. A very short exemplification

Cain represents a new attitude or aspect of human existence. He and Abel have to make offerings to God, a thing that denotes that human existence dwells already in remoteness from God. The idea of an offering or sacrifice shows the ambiguity and negative side of the new post-lapsarian existence. There has been a

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. XXII.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. XXIX.

transgression of the original community with God, and man cannot mend this destroyed relationship. Man can no longer be sure of God's blessings towards him, since he now lives in a world which is not forthcoming but dangerous and deadly. Man is still dependent on God. The fundamental basis of his existence seems to vanish in man's eyes, since he thinks he no longer enjoys any kind of certainty coming from God. Being acknowledged by the Lord is now reassuring man's existence, his own security and possibility to live and maybe flourish. The fact that God refuses Cain's offerings betokens not only his increased distance to God, but also that God refuses to acknowledge him. An offering implies that man admits that his own existence depends on God, that man acknowledges God's sovereignty over him, and the acceptance from God means that one's existence has the benevolence of the divinity. But no sacrifice or offering can rebuild the original communion. The fall has negatively affected not only the relationship with God, but the relationships between individuals, between genders, and also the relationship that one has with his own being. Cain is jealous over Abel's acceptance by God, whereby his offering is refused. As a result of his dissatisfaction, he commits murder. Cain feels himself not acknowledged by God in his strivings and existence, and one can wonder why, and one can think God acts arbitrarily against Cain. But Cain's murder of his sibling shows that his own inner disposition and workings were already not as they should be. One can see now that God's benevolence is essential for one's life.

Another meaning that the paradigmatic figure of Cain provides is that henceforth God's blessing will no more be given to anyone or in the same amount¹⁰. From now on God's image will become not unlike a tyrant's image, and as something so remote that can no longer be understood or loved, whose actions are deemed being expressions of sheer arbitrariness. Cain fails in getting the long-needed blessings, and the act that was supposed to do good, that is to reaffirm his bond to God, produces evil. God's refusing act toward Cain will transform the two of them into fierce competitors, into enemies. The stake of the conflict is caused by the much-needed blessing of God. God's blessing is everything for man¹¹. Cain stands for the human fallen existence, which falls to acknowledge God as the irreplaceable source of being. This spiritual attitude entertains is an ambiguous one. This existence still needs and wants God's blessing. Man, as exemplified by Cain, continues to breed, to exist, etc. and even starts to build cities, that are a substitute of God's order with his own, and to replace God's blessing with his own. God's word is no longer enough to give assurance for one's existence, but instead man becomes master and owner of his own existence, and of creation. Enoch is Cain's son, and he has the name that Cain will give to the first city. Enoch means also initiation and beginning. The city as a spiritual, sociological and anthropological reality is in this sense Cain's son. The gift and the grace of God are freely given,

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

but are not the automatically given answer to human efforts; from a protestant theological vision certainly not, since God's grace and man's efforts are opposed. Not being accepted or acknowledged by God is mostly the case for human existence. Cain, as Adam and Eve's descendant, deepens the breach between man and God, first through the sibling's murder and then by building the city. This activity of building, because men are builders, is intimately connected, as in Jacques Ellul's theological vision, with man's strivings against God, with his efforts to replace him. After the deed is done, the earth becomes bare, much harder to get something living out of it, or even impossible. The lack of harmony and the break with nature that was completed by the fall of the original couple is now deepening. And so, in order to survive, Cain has to build a city.

The story of Cain and Abel is a story of the deepening and multiplication of sin – *Anwachsen der Sünde*. The story tells us that the ontological situation of man worsens, but also that God warns him not to let it happen. Cain refuses to acknowledge that the cause of his being mean and angry resides in himself and not in Abel. He should have rejoiced in the fact that Abel got his blessings from the Lord¹². The murder attests only to the fact that there was a deep break between the two siblings, and it was not the product of God's blessing. Justice seems not being able to exist outside Eden, and Cain cannot stand the inequality which now exists between him and his brother. The tension that befalls the relationship between Adam and Eve after the fall, and then between Cain and Abel is transposed inside man's inner being. Somehow man – or Cain in this case – has to get a hold on the sin that ravages his inner life, so that he can lead a normal human existence.

Another consequence of the fall is that the relationships between men and women, but between individuals *tout court*, will cease to be egalitarian and become hierarchical. The most important lesson of this story is that evil starts to manifest itself just in the moment when man thinks he takes steps to fight evil, or when he tries to develop better means to prevent/fight it more efficiently. Cain is not presented as being born a murderer as an evil being from the beginning, but only after his offering to God had been refused. Evil results from an act that was intended to help getting a blessing from God, not from an evil act.

“Die Tragik dessen, was er schildert, liegt in Gn3 wie in Gn4 vielmehr darin, daß die Menschen gerade das Böse tun, indem sie auf ihre Art das Gute wollen”¹³.

The fact of not getting God's blessing makes Cain angry, and so he will refuse God from now on, trying to do without him. He thinks that he doesn't need God's blessing or benevolence, but the kind of people who choose this course of action must live without it, because they exclude themselves from receiving the grace. Cain has to run, has to abandon his home, his existence becomes unsafe, etc. This is not the result of a curse of God. The so-called

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 130.

¹³ “The tragic of what is described consist in, as Gn3 and Gn4 show, in the fact that people do evil, while they try to accomplish the good in their own way” (*Ibidem*, p. 131).

curse of Cain is the result of his own doing. He doesn't live from working the land anymore; he becomes a nomad. His existence is a groundless one - *bodenlose Existenz*.

Cain leaves the place where he once lived and belonged, wanders, takes a wife, and then he builds a city, to make up for this wandering, groundless existence. Cain is constrained by his own actions to build a kind of ground for his own sake, and for the sake of his children and descendants. But this new creation is opposed to the divine act of creation. Cain doesn't believe God when He promises him to punish or to curse anyone who takes on Cain. Once again, this first city is called Enoch – meaning beginning, and/or initiation. Partially the building of the city has its roots in the memory of paradise, but its main thrust lies in the attempt to repeat, to imitate the divine act of creation. The motive stems not so much from piety or from the wish to repair the bond with God¹⁴. He tries to build himself the creation from which he was exiled.

Even if the building of the city can be construed as being a progress, that is from a certain point of view, nevertheless this technical progress is the result of an act that takes place in the existential remoteness from God. It also deepens this remoteness, though there is no intent to do so. Cain is trying to build himself a *Heimat*, a home. The city is being the first place where Cain – and humankind – thinks it can be itself, autonomous, protected from dangers. The city is the material sign of man's security and purported wealth and freedom. Building civilizations or creating cultures are the product of man's own efforts, their purpose being the recreation of a home, that is lost and can be found again only in God. Cultural efforts or arrangements are not redemptive; the only redemptive force is God, *ihr heil ist allein Gott*¹⁵.

For the heathen mythologies the cities are the product of the heroes or of some god, a view that is not endorsed by the Bible. Cities are man-made, and are made without taking God into account, being an attempt to steal from Him his creative power, attempts to create a Garden of Eden, but without its source of life, that is God. They are without or against God¹⁶.

Since God remains the exclusive source and origin of redemption, the city remains what she really is, namely an environment full of unhappiness, of being lost, of alienation and slavery in many forms – even today. Each one of these is not driven out by progress, but is being increased.

“For God's Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself – just as he substituted his own security for God's. Such is the act by which Cain takes his destiny on his own shoulders, refusing the hand of God in his life”¹⁷.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

¹⁶ *Idem*.

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trad. Dennis Pardee, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2011, p. 5.

Cain initiates, begins a world that is opposed to Eden. This is a man's world. Exclusively so. God's creation loses its meaning and value in the eyes of man; a new creation has to be built. The city is a start made by man that gives meaning and value to things now. The man, which is now a murderer, has taken possession of the world and bends it to his own will¹⁸.

The solution to man's problem lies in God's hand. But His solution is for Cain, and for man generally speaking, no longer acceptable. Man is completely driven by the idea that the solution to his predicament must come only from himself. He wants to redeem himself through his own efforts without heavenly assistance. Cain wants to become a self-made man. Nevertheless, his own situation depends on God's grace, like everything else in creation.

But this attempt to repair his situation does not produce what Cain wants. Each remedy is followed by a new disobedience, and Cain sinks deeper, gets himself trapped in a situation which is governed by the dialectal mechanism of evil, by the cunning of evil. By taking control of creation, man forces creation to take on his own destiny, that is sin, slavery and evil, exploitation, conquest. Some of those will become means by which man tries to assure his own existence, or to assert and extend his dominion. Dominion, conquest, self-boasting are all figures of evil and are meant to try to replace the creative and redemptive action of God. They express the fear that now has dominion over man. They make up an important part of man's wisdom utility toolbox. Cain represents human wisdom as opposed to God's wisdom, and here lies the beginning of modernity, of utopia, and of every plan or project that seeks to gain dominion over other people, over creation, and over man itself (sex changes come to mind, but also genetic modified plants or animals are expression of this will-to-power).

Conclusion

As one can see the problem of evil has a dialectical dimension, and the origin of evil in the world is in many cases an action or intention that was supposed to be good. Evil is the product of two actions: the replacement of God's will and goals in creation with man's will and goals, also in the overreaching of man to things that are not really in his power to solve, and also in the man's attempt to undo the evil he has done without God's help.

Man tries to substitute God both times. Both of these are expression of man's will to substitute God, so that he can gain again a solid ground for his life, to gain acknowledgement. But each of these becomes in the end its own negation.

Man can never take God's place as the principle of life, and man's supposed dominion and conquest of nature – which the city embodies – will

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 6–7.

end in creating further monstrosities and disasters. One should really think of the attempt to eliminate injustice and inequality in the communist lands, and to the terror and misery that it has produced, and then the truth of aforementioned statements might come to light.

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