

'Radical evil' revived

Hitler, Kant, Luther, neo-Lacanianism

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By a terrible coincidence, I revise this paper for publication in the shadow of the mass murder at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. From all sides come the anguished questions: 'Why?' 'How could such a thing happen?' 'What sort of people could do it?' The word 'evil' pops up now and again, but for the most part the experts speak of the alienation of the young shooters and the failure of their parents or school authorities to recognize the 'warning signs'. A commentator on television informs us that 'anyone who would do such a thing has to be in a lot of pain'. Thus, despite the monstrosity of the event, despite the shock and horror with which it strikes the culture, the prevalent world-view seems to hold steady. We can explain what happened as a failure of society – possibly a very deep failure, betokening a chronic and accelerating fraying of the social bond, but still one that can be addressed at the level of sociological cause and effect, without recourse to any notion of metaphysical evil or of a radical flaw in the human will. Even spokesmen for the 'religious right' – at least those like Jerry Falwell who reach a mainstream audience – do not speak of the ineradicable evil of human nature; they recommend palliatives like putting prayer back in schools.

I cannot disagree with the secular experts at least; I am committed to the Nietzschean project of 'reinscribing man back into nature', and therefore in some way to the naturalistic perspective that guides these experts' assessment. And yet I feel uneasy about the intellectual complacency underlying the culture-wide, but transient, emotional shock. Nietzsche's naturalism was intended to disturb the pieties of his culture: to deny the existence of anything *higher* than this world, whether transcendent or transcendental, that could give the rule to human existence, and through this denial to open a more vigorous, even heroic, attitude toward life than the one he saw around him. He did not foresee a time in which the naturalistic perspective would be transformed into a pacifying murmur by a vast bureaucracy of counsellors and

psychologists. In particular, he did not foresee that to conceive human motivation completely in terms of natural causality would turn the subject into an *ethical cipher*, the very opposite of the spontaneous creator of new, higher values that Nietzsche envisioned.

It is in the context of this unease that I turn with interest to the recent efforts by a group of thinkers influenced by Lacan, including Slavoj Žižek, Juliet Flower McCannell, and (the two on whom I will focus because they offer the most polemical theses) Joan Copjec and Jacob Rogozinski, to revive the notion of metaphysical or, in a term derived from Kant, 'radical' evil as the only plausible explanation for the horrors of human history, including that most horrifying horror of all, the Holocaust.¹ Copjec and Rogozinski stress that we need to conceive radical evil as the principle of an originary choice made *freely* by human will, which is therefore responsible for its crimes in a way no naturalism can revoke. While I am not predisposed to favour the resuscitation of the notions of free will and radical evil, Copjec and Rogozinski make a powerful point when they suggest that the reigning ethical discourses are not pitched at a depth adequate to the horrors of history, and especially modern history with its totalitarianisms and genocides. In a persuasive reading of Hannah Arendt's work, Rogozinski argues that her notion of the banality of evil, because it ascribes Eichmann's evil to 'an absence of will, ... a freedom which has renounced itself', supports the contemporary retreat from ascription of responsibility. In her earlier work on the Holocaust, however, Arendt invoked Kant's notion of radical evil in a way that in Rogozinski's view comes much closer to the mark. In fact, Arendt's reflections on Nazism that Rogozinski cites from various of her books strikingly parallel the essentially Lacanian account Rogozinski favours, which claims to explain the specifically modern shape of evil under totalitarianism. On this account, the dark side of the modern movement towards democracy and egalitarianism is the decay of the 'symbolic order', such that, with the effacement of 'longstand-

ing differences of condition and status' that used to confer identity on individuals, the seemingly natural distinction of race becomes the last boundary against narcissistic panic in the face of 'a chaos in which all identity dissolves'. In this chaos of indistinction the anti-Semite models his own quest for mastery after his fantasmatic image of the Jew as secret master of the world. Hence Hitler's fascination with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which Arendt suggested was used by the Nazis as 'a model for the future organization of the German masses for purposes of global domination'. But the Jew, as antagonistic double of the German, must be exterminated because, as Hitler is said to have declared, 'there cannot be two chosen peoples'.²

The crucial point for Rogozinski is that this play of identifications occurs in a context in which the moral law has ceased to be considered as transcendent and has been assigned a worldly locus (a process Copjec dubs 'subreption'³), as the law of racial superiority. 'The Nazi borrows an objectified law from the discourse of science, which is converted into a law of nature, and whose docile servant he wishes to be, the agent of its historical fulfilment'; but precisely because this law is understood as immanent, it can be understood by Hitler at the same time as 'the law of the Subject, of a conscious will that aspires to domination'. As such, Hitler made a 'free decision' in which Nazi totalitarianism originated:

By contrast, what characterizes the position of the law in Judaism, and its reworking in Kant's ethics, is the fact that the subject is ... determined as obliged or held hostage by a prescription whose source remains forever indeterminate. A law without author or master, which is uttered in an empty place, inaccessible to a finite subject. The pure practical imperative, which 'gives us nothing to see,' assures us of no theoretical knowledge, no power, no enjoyment, which demands nothing but our respectful listening, the obedience of a being who is obliged, his abandonment of self.⁴

This is, I think, a very rich and thought-provoking account, one that has Heidegger as well as Kant and Arendt behind it and which participates in a widespread movement of recent French thought (including, for example, though in quite different modalities, Levinas, Derrida, Lyotard and Alain Badiou) in conceiving the principle of ethical being as something infinitely mysterious, abyssal and indeterminate, yet absolutely exigent.⁵ And Rogozinski is on solid ground when he points to modern biology as an essential component in Nazi race ideology, for recent work has made clearer than ever the rootedness of twentieth-century racism in its peculiar appropriation of science – an

appropriation to which such a major scientific figure as Ernst Haeckel made a significant contribution.⁶ We must have the Law, Rogozinski argues, but the spectre of fascism warns us against any naturalistic immanentizing of law; hence this difficult thought of 'a prescription whose source remains forever indeterminate' but which forbids us to do evil.

But now comes an intriguing twist in the direction of Freud and Lacan. Rogozinski goes on to gloss the 'law without author' as follows: 'This empty place of the Other is that of the dead father, whose withdrawal is marked by the Law. Freud taught us to recognize, in the murder of the father, the primordial event which inaugurates the symbolic debt binding each subject to the Law.'⁷ Here Rogozinski follows Lacan's account of Freud's myth of the primordial killing of the father, 'the myth of a time for which God is dead'.⁸ 'But if for us God is dead,' Lacan continues, 'it is because he has always been dead, and that's what Freud says.'



Whereas Nietzsche saw in the death of God the crisis of nihilism, Freud, on Lacan's telling, saw in it the deepest essence of the spiritual or ethical truth of Judaism and Christianity: that ethical humanity is constituted by a relation of infinite guilt towards a hidden or vanished figure that can only be conceived as Father, such that the destructive aggressivity of the subject is channelled back against himself through the circuit of love and guilt that the crime against the father activates. God is dead, yet the place of his disappearance marks the locus of the debt and the obligation to which the law holds us hostage.

Now, if this seems a far-fetched supplement to Kant, we should remember the deeply irrational impulses of *Massenpsychologie* that animate fascism, in particular the cathexis of a Leader who incarnates the Law for the masses and sends them off on their rampage; as Arendt reminds us, Eichmann began as a strict

Kantian but eventually learned to set Hitler's command in place of the categorical imperative. There is, the neo-Lacanian argue, an obscene *jouissance*, arising from unconscious sources, in the identification with the immanent fascist law and in the violence that this law authorizes, and any ethical discourse that seeks to counter the tendencies toward such *jouissance* must recognize them for what they are, in all their irrational depth. The Law must be set out of the reach of appropriation for the ends of those whose real wish is to be lawless or to pervert the command of the law so as to authorize their obscene enjoyment; the myth of the primordial murder is the adequate representation of the noumenal character of the Law, 'causing us', as Copjec says, 'to respect a father with whom we are unable to identify and a law to which we are unable to conform.'⁹

I cannot pretend to do justice to the richness and subtlety of the arguments of these writers, who, moreover, disagree on key points; but the above sketch captures what I take to be the central outline of their position.¹⁰ While I find this position fascinating and provocative, it is one against which Nietzsche sets me on my guard, as an attempt to refurbish the Christian anthropology and ethic in contemporary terms that do without the reference to God. Kant, with his attempt to make the transcendent 'thou shalt not' self-uttering, is the key figure in the historical movement toward the philosophical sanitizing of Christianity; but the neo-Lacanian put Kant through a Heideggerian refurbishing to yield Lacanian transcendentalism or hyper-transcendentalism (it is hard to know what name to give to post-Heideggerian metaphysics with its transcendence-that-vanishes). Copjec and Rogozinski claim to be liberating from the text of Kant (especially *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*) a conception of evil that makes a radical break with the entire Western intellectual tradition, in order to show the crypto-Christian nature of this conception. The question of evil needs to be resituated within the intellectual context that is its proper home, the context of Christian theology.

Kant, Christianity and free will

Copjec and Rogozinski claim that Kant's idea of radical evil was radically new because prior to him the entire Western tradition denied the possibility of a will that freely and consciously chooses evil. As Rogozinski puts it, 'The Western tradition has continually affirmed that "no one is wicked voluntarily", that Being and the Good are the same, and that evil comes from nothingness, that it is nothing but impotence and privation of being.' This account is an oddly

confused mixture of Plato and Augustine. The Platonic texts did of course advance an optimistic doctrine of the will, and Augustine developed the doctrine, fundamentally influential in the later development of Christianity, that evil is a privation of being rather than a substance. But Augustine did not hold the Platonic doctrine that the will only wills good, and he most



emphatically did not hold the doctrine that Copjec claims to be orthodox in the Western tradition, the doctrine that an 'external incentive' or 'pure animal interest' could 'in the absence of will ... govern the actions of men'. Quite the contrary: as Augustine declared around the end of the fourth century in his treatise *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 'nothing can make the mind a companion of desire except its own will (*voluntas*) and free choice (*liberum arbitrium*).' This doctrine, which became orthodox in Catholic Christianity (and was never renounced by Augustine himself, who obscurely reconciled it with his later predestinarianism), holds that human beings are not only capable of being wicked voluntarily but that it is *only* voluntarily that they can be wicked. That is why God can justly condemn them to hell for their sins. Indeed, to hold that one sins by the compulsion of the flesh was held by the church to be the kind of heresy of which Manichaeism is the prototype; the Cathars or Albigensians of southern France were massacred in the thirteenth century in part for holding such a doctrine. Free will is no mere privation but, in the technical sense of the term, a 'positive' force by which the human soul *turns* toward nullity; indeed, in the *Confessions* Augustine suggests that to will evil is to attempt to be like God – to produce 'a darkened

image of omnipotence'. The notion that evil is 'privation of being' coexists, in orthodox Christianity, with this 'positivity' of free will.¹¹

Copjec and Rogozinski cannot be unaware of these elementary facts about Christian doctrine; they presumably do not think these details affect the essentials of their argument. On my view of the matter, however, these details are essential because they bear on the major point I want to emphasize: that Kant's doctrines of radical evil and free will cannot be understood abstractly as 'philosophical' but must be referred to their discursive context, a longstanding intramural debate within Christian theology over the limits of the human will.¹²

Kant himself makes no secret of the fact that his project is to preserve the structure of the Christian system of belief by translating it into philosophically respectable terms. It is true that he gives the impression of an advance beyond Christianity by invoking the 'freedom' and 'autonomy' of human beings as rational beings; as Kant famously assures us in the second *Critique*, the only constraint the human will endures in its submission to the moral law is that which is exercised 'through the legislation of one's own reason'. This sounds very progressive and enlightened, and has proved highly successful in snaring the interest of a philosophical tradition that has little interest in theology, yet this law that purportedly belongs to the legislation of our very own reason is, in Kant's conception, separated by an uncrossable ontological abyss from human beings as worldly, embodied selves; it is only our noumenal selves that are free, and our noumenal selves are as infinitely removed from our worldly 'phenomenal' selves as is the 'kingdom of God' from this world. In fact, the notion of the noumenon is a philosophical transliteration of what Christianity calls 'spirit'. This is more obvious in an explicitly theological tract like the religion and reason essay than it is in Kant's more strictly philosophical treatises. Yet, despite the distance between phenomenon and noumenon, Kant believes in orthodox Christian fashion that it is possible for the evil will to be 'born again', to undergo a total transformation of heart such that we become capable of willing the moral law in its purity as the sole ground of all our maxims.¹³ In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant rejects the Lutheran and Calvinist notion that only divine grace can bring the human will to will the good in favour of a position that, at least with regard to the question of free will, is practically identical to the Catholic view that Erasmus had championed in 1524 in his treatise berating Luther for his denial of free will. This view, common to Erasmus and Kant, is that grace is, in some way that we cannot understand, the ultimate

fount of regeneration, but that it is damaging to the morale of believers to think their own initiative has nothing to do with salvation; consequently, we must frame our moral deliberations *as though* we really could do something towards making ourselves suitable recipients of God's grace.¹⁴

Copjec and Rogozinski are both concerned, though in different ways, to save Kant from his optimistic turn in order to liberate from his text what they consider his crucial insight: the ineradicable evil of human nature. But if this is what they are looking for, why not look to Luther and Calvin, who do truly assert just such a doctrine? No doubt Luther and Calvin lack the philosophical authority of Kant, but that is not the only reason they will not serve Copjec's and Rogozinski's purpose; they also deny the freedom of the will, which Copjec and Rogozinski want to save. Copjec and Rogozinski are, however, equally intent on rejecting the optimistic voluntarism of the Enlightenment, the belief in the freedom of the human will to perfect itself (secular equivalent of what is known theologically as the 'Pelagian heresy'), because they see in this belief the roots of the immanentizing or 'subreption' of transcendence that eventually produces totalitarianism. Thus the free will they propose to hold responsible for evil must be one that, although free, nevertheless inveterately fails to will the Law and is therefore perpetually 'guilty'.

This feeling of guilt, recall, is the way in which the Law announces itself and is therefore essential and ineradicable – hence the ineradicability of the will to evil. But then where is the freedom that is supposed to render me responsible for my wrongs? The free will proclaimed by Copjec and Rogozinski is a will that cannot choose good but only evil, and in choosing evil discovers its guilt under the Law and by virtue of this guilt its 'transcendence' of nature. This transcendence is what they are really interested in, and it is what they call freedom – not freedom to choose good or evil but *freedom from the embrace of nature of something about the subject*. Since the free will they propose is ineradicably skewed toward evil, however, it is practically indistinguishable from the 'will in bondage to evil' of Luther and Calvin.

Is Freud a Lutheran?

Lacan's account of transcendent Law is more thoroughly secularized than is Kant's. But if we turn to Lacan's major published discussion of the evil will in Seminar 7, we find that, even as he translates the Christian concepts into his own language, he insists on their Christian provenance. He is fond of quoting Augustine's famous remark about the babe in arms

who is already consumed with envy and hatred of another baby, and in Seminar 7 St Paul and Luther come in for special notice as authorities on the evil of the human will, on the same side as Freud against the classical tradition of ethical philosophy (including the Catholic tradition after Aquinas) – a tradition that Lacan, in an idiosyncratic usage of the term, labels ‘hedonist’. Lacan means by ‘hedonist’ that this tradition is oriented toward the notion of the good as the natural telos and resting place of the human will. Aiming at the good would traditionally be conceived as the opposite of a hedonistic motive, but Lacan has a valid point because this traditional, let us call it ‘Platonic’, usage makes a distinction between the ‘lower’ pleasures of the hedonist and the ‘higher’ pleasures of the moral or spiritual person, which are the *real*, dependable pleasures. As opposed to this higher hedonism, according to Lacan, ‘Freud is telling us the same thing as St. Paul, namely, that what governs us on the path of our pleasure is no sovereign good.’ Plato and Aquinas of course knew that human beings are often dominated by impulses that do not aim at the good, but this is because they stray from the goal that is prescribed by the ultimate nature of things that *de jure* (if not *de facto*) ‘governs’ the soul; whereas Lacan appears to attribute to Paul and Freud the view that the soul *in its ultimate nature* is governed by the aim at evil.¹⁵

The intermediate figure between Paul and Freud is Luther, who (Lacan argues) in his debate with Erasmus pulled Christianity back onto the true Pauline–Augustinian path from which it had strayed.

Luther writes of the following – God’s eternal hatred of men, not simply of their failures and the works of their free will, but a hatred that existed even before the world was created....

Not to recognize the filiation or cultural paternity that exists between Freud and [this] new direction of thought ... constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of the kind of problems Freud’s intellectual project addresses.¹⁶

Whether or not this is an accurate account of the ‘cultural paternity’ of Freud’s thought – and I vigorously deny that it is – it is an unimpeachable statement of the paternity of Lacan’s. He places himself squarely in the line of descent that comes from Luther’s condemnation of the human will as – apart from the inexplicable gift of God’s grace – completely, inescapably corrupt. It is to Lacan’s credit that he, at least, makes no secret of the genealogy of his own stance; he announces that he follows Paul, Augustine and Luther. But is he

correct in claiming this as Freud’s genealogy too, or is Lacan rather presumptuously attributing a Christian genealogy to the Jewish Freud?

Here we return to the fascinating synthesis of Kant, Luther and Freud that Lacan posits as the matrix of his own thesis, and to the prominence he gives to Freud’s myth of the primordial murder of the father. This myth has acquired a good deal of currency in poststructuralist writing, in part for the very reasons that it used to be held in disrepute – namely, that it never happened and, even if it had happened, the species-memory of the crime was posited by Freud on discredited Lamarckian principles (Freud never having quite caught up with Darwin). This empirical implausibility becomes a virtue of Freud’s thesis for Lacan and his followers because the primordial murder of the father, as mythical, can be assigned to that noplac and notime that is the transcendent locus of the Law.

It cannot be denied that Freud did in fact posit the prehistoric murder of the father (‘a crime that must have been repeated many times’) and that he continued to hold to it as the ultimate source of the feeling of guilt right to the end. However, it is also true that this speculative or mythical account coexists in Freud’s text with another, properly psychoanalytic account of the ontogenesis of conscience in childhood relations with one’s parents – an account that belongs to that predominant stratum of Freud’s thought that has made him one of the main sources of the modern tendency deplored by Copjec as ‘the historicist error’, the tendency to explain ‘evil’ as a result of bad parenting rather than in terms of the loss of a transcendent dimension in the symbolic order. Does this mean that there are two Freuds – a transcendentalist Freud and a naturalistic Freud – and that one can take one’s pick? Or is one of these the ‘true’ Freud – and if so, how would we decide which one is which? Won’t the decision be determined by our presuppositions concerning the type of explanation – transcendental or naturalistic – that we consider valid?

Let us go back to Freud’s text and see what he actually says. Instead of just plucking the convenient bits from Freud’s discussion, as is commonly done, I want to follow the trajectory of his argument to see what questions he is trying to answer with the theses he introduces, and where he comes out with regard to these theses at the end of his investigation. In fact, what we will see is that there is a fundamental flaw in the architecture of Freud’s argument that seriously vitiates the thesis of the primordial patricide on grounds internal to Freud’s own text.

Freud posited a phylogenetic origin of the sense of guilt based on the prehistoric killing of the father in *Totem and Taboo*, published in 1913; but this was before he had fully worked out his theory of the instincts or drives, work he accomplished beginning with the metapsychological papers of the mid-1910s. He never did give up the earlier speculative hypothesis concerning the origin of the sense of guilt, reasserting it at the end of his life in *Moses and Monotheism*; but he tried in 1930 in Chapter 7 of *Civilization and Its Discontents* to synthesize the earlier phylogenetic thesis with the new account, based on his new theory



of drives, of the ontogenesis of the superego. According to the drive theory, there are two fundamental drives, Eros and aggression, and the sense of guilt arises out of the internalization or turning against the self of aggression that is originally aroused in each child against an 'unattackable authority' – the parent – who prohibits the child from attaining some desired instinctual satisfaction. Since a child feels helplessly dependent on its parents, and the loss of their love would leave the child exposed to the dangers from which it is shielded by the parents' love – especially the danger that they will turn their own punishing aggression against him – the child's greatest fear is this loss. This fear motivates the turning-inward of aggression in the form of that psychic self-punishment we call guilt. From a philosophical standpoint, the radical significance of Freud's ontogenetic theory of guilt is that it is thoroughly naturalistic in its account of the origin of the moral sense: guilt in its origin is simply fear of loss of love, and the function of conscience develops out of the habitual practice of internalization of aggression under the goad of this fear. 'At the

beginning ... what is bad is whatever causes one to be threatened with loss of love.'¹⁷

This theory – which repeats Nietzsche's fundamental notion that morality is born out of the internalization of aggression, while transposing this genesis from culture and history on to individual development – seems complete as stated. Why, then, does it need to be supplemented by the theory of the primordial patricide?¹⁸ The suture between the two accounts is quite flimsy. Freud introduces the phylogenetic account purely and simply in order to explain what he declares to be the *excessiveness* of children's reaction to their 'first great instinctual frustrations'; a reaction whose aggressivity exceeds what, according to Freud, is 'currently justified'. This rage, disproportionate as it is to the aggression perpetrated against the child by the nineteenth-century father – Freud himself, for example – is, however, commensurate with the aggression of the prehistoric father, who was, unlike Freud, 'undoubtedly terrible' in his aggressiveness towards his children. Hence the terrible aggression of the prehistoric father called forth an equally terrible aggression from the prehistoric sons, and this patricidal aggression, repeated many times in prehistory, established the phylogenetic fund of aggressivity on which modern children draw when they make the first, *excessive*, 'instalment' on the aggressivity of their own superegos by overreacting to parental prohibition and then turning the energy of this overreaction against themselves.¹⁹

We might pause to wonder just what measure Freud is using here. What amount of aggressivity is 'justified' in a small child's reaction to parental curbs? Is it meaningful to speak of justification here? Is there anything more behind Freud's judgement than a nineteenth-century bourgeois male adult's insulation from the affective life of infants? There would be no need and indeed no room in Freud's account for the mythical phylogenetic account if it were not for this undefended assumption about the unjustified, excessive character of the child's emotions. Even more important, however, and more damaging to contemporary attempts to make hay with the mythical account, is the fact that the intensity of the child's aggressivity is the only thing that Freud even pretends to explain with this account. What it will *not* explain, he confesses, is the main point at issue, the original origin of guilt. The historical myth merely pushes Freud's original problem concerning how guilt got started back into the past without resolving it. For if the prehistoric brothers felt guilt for killing their father, Freud reasons this guilt

presupposes that a *conscience* – the readiness to feel guilty – was already in existence before the deed ever took place. Remorse of this sort, therefore, never can help us to discover the origin of conscience and of the sense of guilt in general. ... But if the human sense of guilt goes back to the killing of the primal father, that was after all a case of ‘remorse’. Are we to assume that ... a conscience and a sense of guilt were not ... in existence before the deed? If not, where, in this case, did the remorse come from?

Freud’s aporia here has great appeal for contemporary commentators, who draw from it the conclusion that indeed the origin of conscience is logically unaccountable in terms of any empirical genesis and that we must therefore go transcendental. Freud himself, however, emerges from his aporia by renouncing a fundamental assumption that had led up to it, the assumption that the feeling of guilt presupposes the existence of conscience. He now concludes, to the contrary, that conscience or the superego did not yet exist when the primordial remorse emerged, but *guilt* on the other hand *did already* exist. We have to wait until Chapter 8 for this conclusion to be explicitly stated: ‘As to the sense of guilt, we must admit that it is in existence before the super-ego, and therefore before conscience too.’²⁰

Rereading Chapters 7 and 8 with this conclusion in mind one is struck by the fact that Freud is in the remarks cited restating more boldly the position that he had somewhat timidly articulated at the beginning of his discussion of guilt. In small children, he had said, the sense of guilt is ‘clearly only a fear of loss of love, “social” anxiety’. But at that point, apparently under the influence of philosophical orthodoxy, Freud minimizes the moral significance of this form of guilt. He initially calls it guilt, but then hedges: it is a sort of guilt, but not really, truly guilt in the full sense; it is not until the internalization of the accusing agency, properly speaking, ‘that we should speak of conscience or a sense of guilt’. Yet this dependence of guilt on the function of conscience is precisely what he rejects in Chapter 8, because it leads him into an aporia that there is no need for him to be stuck with: all he needs to do is reassert his own theory of the psychic dynamics out of which guilt is born.²¹

According to orthodox philosophical ideology, guilt is supposed to be the crown jewel in the superiority to ‘primitive culture’ of Christian civilization and its heirs; it is, by definition, a product of that internalized agency of ethical judgement that we call conscience. Before this internalization takes place, one is properly capable only of that more rudimentary moral

feeling called *shame*; even the Greeks of the classical period are suspected of not having transcended such a primitive morality. Yet Freud posits guilt not as the result of conscience but as the condition out of which conscience originates. His final position with respect to the origin of the sense of guilt in *Civilization and its Discontents* is thus radically naturalistic. Not only is there no need to posit a nameless, placeless, transcendent origin for the sense of guilt; we do not even need to presuppose an intrinsically *moral* locus – the conscience – for this origin. Guilt, which will give rise to conscience, is ‘at bottom nothing else but a topographical variety of anxiety’, ‘the *immediate expression* of fear of the external authority ... the *direct derivative* of the conflict between the need for the authority’s love and the urge towards instinctual satisfaction’.²²



What, then, does Freud achieve towards filling out his ontogenetic account of the origin of conscience with the detour through phylogenesis? The phylogenetic account was supposed to fill in something that was missing from the ontogenetic account, but in its final form, once we throw out the ungrounded and unexplained notion of excessiveness, it turns out to be nothing but a *repetition of the ontogenetic account*, and a repetition that creates incoherence. In throwing the account of the origin of guilt back into prehistory, Freud merely imagines the primal brotherhood as young adults going through precisely the same process of anxiety-producing conflict with the father that we moderns go through as children. But how could the prehistoric brothers have failed to develop a superego as children by this very same process? And if the phylogeny of the superego is identical with its ontogeny, then what is gained by positing a phylogeny at all?

It is true that Freud finds it impossible to relinquish the idea of the prehistoric murder of the father. But while that tells us something about the nature of Freud's own obsessions, it lends no structural significance to this idea within the architecture of his overall theory of guilt. Once the economic account of the origin of guilt out of anxiety has solved the paradox of the origin of conscience, the only distinctive mark (and one whose significance he depreciates) that Freud assigns to the primordial murder in Chapter 8 is that it is an aggression actually committed, as opposed to aggressions that are repressed and internalized. At this point Freud implies what seems very dubious, that modern humans from the very beginning of their lives feed their superegos with repressed aggression without ever having expressed any (but in that case, whatever led him to think their aggressivity is *excessive*?) – a fact, if it were a fact, that the phylogenetic account would explain. But if guilt originates in the anxiety of conflict with the loved–hated authority, there is no need to postulate anything so drastic as the *murder* of this authority; anything the subject does that provokes the law-enforcing aggression of the authority, and therefore the urge in the child to aggress back, would set off this anxiety. There would thus be in the life of any child plenty of occasion for guilt to arise – especially in relation to those erotic impulses that Freud himself stresses.

The myth of the primordial murder of the father, far from pointing to the essence of Freud's insight into the nature of the superego, is thus an idiosyncratic excrescence in Freud's otherwise Nietzschean account, and Freud can be no more validly invoked as an intellectual antecedent of the theory of radical evil than Kant, although for different reasons. Kant, because he is an optimistic neo-Christian humanist who believes that the perverse human heart can be born again; Freud because, in so far as his account is coherent and intelligible, his fundamental concern is with the empirical conditions under which human beings develop a sense of guilt, and thus one of those who, in Copjec's terms, commit the historicist error.

Nietzsche contra Lacan

A great deal rides on the claim of the radical evil theorists that they can explain the true nature of the holocaust, for if their explanation is valid it means that the entire adventure of modernity since the Enlightenment was always on track for disaster. The real target that Copjec and Rogozinski are attacking is the notion that human beings are merely mortal, finite beings and nothing more; as Copjec puts it, if the subject becomes

'totally assimilated to its mortality', it follows that the transcendent dimension of the subject, 'the fact [*sic*] that the subject *is* free', must reassert itself in the assertion of totalitarian power by which human beings deny death and the existence of any 'checks on the power of the human will'.²³

Reduced to its bare bones, there is nothing new about this claim: it is the idea that when human beings stop believing in God, they start to think they *are* God. In the aftermath of Kant, Heidegger and Lacan, this claim is restated in a way that preserves the structure of the old claim while volatilizing or hyper-sublating the God-concept into notions like 'the empty place of the Law' and 'the invisible horizon of transcendence'. Yet the basic point that the radical evil theorists are asserting is plausible: it may be (as I, from my inveterately naturalistic standpoint would want to put it) that human evolution has produced an animal who cannot live in society without setting up a symbolic order oriented toward a transcendent source of authority of some sort. I am loathe to believe this, and I think it far from proven that, whatever may be the case for given individuals, humanity in the mass has such a need; but I concede that it might be so, and I think this claim alone makes the whole radical evil thesis worth debating. Yet the very claim that human beings need transcendence might itself be the cause of human beings coming to feel the need for transcendence, and we can have no fair test of the matter until we have an instance of a society in which such claims have been thoroughly extinguished. To date, we have no such instances (in the West, at least), nor any that come remotely close; what we do have is societies that exist in the shadow of Christian transcendentalism. Nietzsche's analysis of the advent of nihilism is still the best account we have of this situation, and in my view gives us a more accurate sense of the state of European society at the birth of Nazism than does the account of the radical evil theorists. According to this analysis, European civilization by the nineteenth century had put all its ethical eggs in the basket of transcendence, but the same instinct for truth that had created the system of transcendence had now called it into question, and with the collapse of this system the spectre of meaninglessness loomed. The Lacanians would no doubt argue that what is needed in such a situation is precisely the new form of transcendence or hyper-transcendence that they supply: one that does not rely on any positive belief or belief in a transcendent being but instead on the very disappearance of all positivity in the realm of the transcendent.

Nietzsche's project is the opposite: press all the way to the other side of nihilism and create new values that are explicitly of this world – because that is all values really are in any case, beneath their transcendent and hyper-transcendent disguises. What was wrong with European civilization in Nietzsche's view was chiefly its mendacity, its irresistible inclination to clothe human motivation in the pious garb of submission to what is more and higher than human. If Nazism is indeed to be understood as a subreption of the transcendent, which is plausible, the historicizing Nietzschean would see this as one case more of the old habit of mendacity – a problem not of too little transcendence but of still not enough immanence. Germany in the first part of the twentieth century was still under the influence of a Christian or Christian-derived ideology of transcendence. If there was a decidedly pagan impulse in Nazism, this did not stop the orthodox Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, from lending their wholehearted support to Hitler, and, as Bishop Martin Sasse of Thuringia gleefully pointed out in 1938, it was peculiarly fitting that the burning of the synagogues on *Kristallnacht* took place on Luther's birthday, that very Luther whom Sasse celebrated as 'the greatest antisemite of his time'.²⁴

What motivates the immanentizing of transcendence could thus well be not a transhistorical or transcendent need for transcendence but a pre-existent ideology of transcendence or a need generated by such an ideology. How easily the old transcendence and the new immanence can dovetail is evident from the declaration by the German Catholic episcopate in 1936 that 'Race, soil, blood and people are precious natural values which God the Lord has created and the care of which he has entrusted to us Germans.'²⁵ And from this point of view, Lacan's and Copjec's and Rogozinski's hyper-sublation of the ideology of transcendence into the disappearance of the law or the withdrawal of Absolute Spirit is interpretable as not the solution but the continuation of the problem it pretends to solve, in so far as it enables the ideology of transcendence to continue its crypto-Christian afterlife in the guise of a supersophisticated, post-poststructuralist demystification of the demystifying discourse of modernity.²⁶

However, it is one thing to proclaim for the creation of Nietzschean 'life-affirming' values and another to actually create them. Certainly one must, as liberationist movements of various sorts have done from the beginning of the century, sift Nietzsche's doctrines to separate those that contribute to such a task from those that helped the Nazis conceive of themselves as agents of a natural law of race.²⁷ In addition, the problem

remains of how to counter the prevailing tendency toward the reduction of ethical responsibility to an effect of ineluctable natural causes; I wholly agree with Copjec and Rogozinski's diagnosis of this tendency as an ethical ill that afflicts our civilization.

The reduction they deplore can, however, be analysed as a result not of the 'historicist error' but of an erroneous historicism, indeed an inept and sentimental ideological simulacrum of historicism. An investigation of real societies in their real historical functioning, including our own, reveals not the bare fact that human action always follows on causal antecedents, but functioning concepts of responsibility and, more important, customs of *holding-responsible* that human groups work out variously and that require no foundation in metaphysics. The recent work along these lines of that excellent Nietzschean Bernard Williams shows in an exemplary fashion how impoverished is the concept of ethical personhood in the Kantian tradition, as in philosophy generally.²⁸ The questions we ask when we ascribe praise or blame are not, is there a transcendent essence of the subject that willed this, but did he or did he not do it *on purpose*, or even, given that it was unintentional, are there things that he *ought to have known*, or, knowing them, ought to have taken into consideration that would have made a difference in how he acted? Let us not forget that, banal or not, Eichmann was hanged for his crimes, and hardly anyone doubts that he deserved it.

In the end, we should remember that Zarathustran values and post-Heideggerian vanishing law alike are such intellectually sophisticated notions that they are unlikely to have any significant effect at the level of communities and nations. The best way to use Nietzsche is probably Williams's way: not as a guide to a new, *übermenschlich* morality but as a reminder of the human-all-too-human nature of all values. The rhetoric of hyper-transcendence creates the mirage of a transphenomenal boundary majestic enough to stem the tide of history. The naturalistic perspective has at least the virtue of not encouraging this delusion.

Notes

1. The sourcebook for this debate is the collection edited by Joan Copjec, *Radical Evil* (Verso, London, 1996), which includes essays by the four writers mentioned. This collection provided much of the impetus behind the international conference on evil held at the University of Southampton under the sponsorship of the John Hansard Gallery in May 1998, for which the original version of the present article was written. I am grateful to Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek for their critical responses to my paper at that time. My summary of the Lacanian position will draw heavily on Rogozinski's very clear account of radical evil in an earlier article, 'Hell on Earth: Hannah

- Arendt in the Face of Hitler', trans. Peter Dews, *Philosophy Today*, Fall 1993, pp. 257–74.
2. Rogozinski, 'Hell on Earth', pp. 260, 269, 270, 262, 265.
 3. Joan Copjec, 'Introduction: Evil in the Time of the Finite World', in *Radical Evil*, p. xx.
 4. Rogozinsky, 'Hell on Earth', pp. 266, 262, 261, 266.
 5. Badiou has recently been referred to by Jean-Jacques Lecercle ('Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, *même combat*', *Radical Philosophy* 93, January–February 1999, pp. 6–13) as a thinker of immanence (p. 7), but I fail to see how this can be said when Badiou's thinking is radically universalistic, based on a feature, the 'event', which is, as Lecercle himself notes, 'outside of time' (p. 12).
 6. On Haeckel's role first as champion in Germany of Darwinism and subsequently in the development of Nazi race ideology, see Pat Shipman, *The Evolution of Racism: Human Differences and the Use and Abuse of Science*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994, pp. 73–103.
 7. Rogozinski, 'Hell on Earth', p. 266.
 8. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, W.W. Norton, New York, 1992, p. 177.
 9. Copjec, 'Introduction: Evil in the Time of the Finite World', p. xxii.
 10. Žižek debates the positions of Copjec and Rogozinski in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, London, 1997, pp. 225–39.
 11. Rogozinsky, 'Hell on Earth', p. 260; Copjec, 'Introduction: Evil in the Time of the Finite World', pp. x–xi, xi; Augustine, *Free Choice*, I, xi; *Confessions*, II, vi.
 12. A major new contribution to our understanding of the evolution of Kant's ethical thinking has been made by J.B. Schneewind in his magisterial *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998; but I find nothing in Schneewind's account that would contradict the very schematic remarks about Kant that I make here.
 13. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson, Harper & Row, New York, 1960, p. 43.
 14. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–47.
 15. Lacan, Seminar 7, pp. 221, 95.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
 17. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI, trans. James Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 1961, p. 124.
 18. Freud seems to have cribbed most of his argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents* from the *Genealogy of Morals*. See Lorin Anderson, 'Freud, Nietzsche', *Salmagundi* 47–48, Winter–Spring 1980, pp. 3–39.
 19. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 131. In the paragraphs I am discussing Freud also makes his famous remark, much beloved and cited by theorists in recent years, that 'the severity of the super-ego which a child develops in no way corresponds to the severity of the treatment which he has himself met with' (p. 130). It is almost never noted that Freud immediately qualifies this categorical pronouncement, adding that 'it would be wrong to exaggerate' the 'independence' of the two factors; for what we really have is another instance of 'a universal aetiological condition for all such processes', the convergence of 'innate constitutional factors and influences from the real environment' (p. 130).
 20. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 132, 136.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
 22. *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 136. Emphasis added.
 23. Copjec, 'Introduction: Evil in the Time of the Finite World', p. xx.
 24. Julius H. Schoeps, *Leiden in Deutschland: Vom anti-semitischen Wahn und der Last der Erinnerung*, Piper, Munich, 1990, p. 60; cited in Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Vintage Books, New York, 1997, p. 111. I have been convinced by Goldhagen's critics that his monocausal explanation of the Holocaust is seriously flawed, but his bibliography and summary of accounts of the German churches under the Nazis is useful. See especially pp. 106–14.
 25. Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964, p. 163; cited in Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p. 106.
 26. How one might place Derrida in relation to this discussion is a complex question that I cannot adequately address here, but which I must mention since a superficial or even not so superficial reading of his work – certainly since the turn to Levinas, but also earlier – might see him as engaging in a similar 'hyper-sublation' (I do not recommend the term, and I hope someone can suggest a better). Some such charge was indeed already the substance of Rorty's critique of 'différance' two decades ago. Derrida's famous essay 'Before the Law' in particular mixes Kant and the Freud of the primordial patricide in a way that seems parallel to what the Lacanians do, and Richard Beardsworth's reading of this mixture bolsters the feeling of such a parallel (*Derrida and the Political*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 30–31). Briefly, I would say that one must read this part of 'Before the Law' in the context of the whole essay, which stresses as much the absolute historical contingency of the law in its phenomenalization (and not simply to deplore it, as Copjec and Rogozinski do) as it does the law's dimension of 'withdrawal' from history. Which is to say that in 'Before the Law' Derrida is still practising *deconstruction*.
 27. For a comprehensive account of the tug-of-war between Right and Left over Nietzsche, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890–1990*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992. Geoffrey Waite documents, and shrilly denounces, the widespread influence of Nietzsche on leftist thinking in *Nietzsche's Corpse*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1996. I have analysed the contradictory pulls in Nietzsche's thought between his liberationist and fascist tendencies in *Nietzsche's Voice*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1990, and more recently in 'Dionysus Lost and Found: The Genre of Tragedy as Political Trope in Nietzsche and Lukács', in Salim Kemal, Ivan Gaskell, and Daniel W. Conway, eds, *Nietzsche, Philosophy, and the Arts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
 28. See especially Chapter 3, 'Recognising Responsibility', in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 50–74, and *Shame and Necessity* generally. For a full-scale critique of the philosophical notion that 'all genuinely moral considerations rest, ultimately and at a deep level, in the agent's will', see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Fontana, London, 1985; quotation from p. 7.