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A critical analysis of the relevance of the concept of evil by thinkers Friedrich Nietzsche and Alain Badiou

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Abstract

The concept of evil has been a subject of debate for moral, political, and legal philosophers. Among these, the names of Friedrich Nietzsche and Alain Badiou are particularly worthy of note. Both have considered the problem of evil in path-breaking ways. Nietzsche controversial figure of the nineteenth century German philosophy has often been misunderstood as an immoral, blasphemous and sacrilegious philosopher. His ideas throw a frightening and disturbing challenge to modern consciousness. His writing is an attack on morality, religion, and science. Badiou is considered a post-Althusserian thinker who attempts to reclaim Hegelian heritage. His writing is a combination of different fields and commitments: the mathematical theory of sets and categories, modernist poetry and art, radical politics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Contemporary Theatre, and the history of philosophy from Plato to Lyotard. The aim of this paper is to understand the way these two philosophers approach the question of evil. The paper studies two works of philosophy: Friedrich Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* and Alain Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

Keywords: Evil, morality, ethics, ideologies, politics

Introduction

Prior to nineteenth century, philosophers had considered the nature and origins of evil in natural and moral sphere. The nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche gives a totally different conception about evil from the conceptions prevailing until then. He rethinks the problem of evil in the context of the value systems of morality. He says that the birth of morality dates back to the herding together of the weak and their proclaiming their opponents, the strong, as "bad" or "evil" and, consequently, themselves as "good" and "moral". He considers the concept of evil in the context of Christian theology that promotes the weak in spirit and suppresses the strong. He also announces the death of God in the Age of Enlightenment.

The problem of evil has been considered again in the recent time by contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou who also rejects the idea of God in the context of evil. He does not even include religion in his four generic truth procedures: love, art, science, and politics. Badiou arises above the traditional idea of Christian morality and finds evil beneath good in the context of singular subject. The works under study, Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* and Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, have been particularly chosen in view of their significance.

Nietzsche is considered to be the most challenging and controversial thinker in the history of western philosophy. His writings have become a subject of debate for philosophers. He was largely ignored during his own lifetime; his books did not sell much. Nietzsche's philosophy revolves around a number of ideas like slave revolt in morals, will to power, genealogy, and perspectivism. His concept of morality is of the basis of his attempt to understand the idea of evil.

For Nietzsche, the term "good" refers to "the exalted proud states of the soul" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 260), while the term "bad" refers to "all those who are not good" (Leiter 208). The idea of bad thus emerged as an afterthought. In contrast to "good and bad morality", the term "evil" is used to describe "precisely the 'good man' of the other morality"(qtd in Leiter 209), while the term "good" comes only after evil, that refers to all those who are not evil (209). Those committed to slave morality designates the noble class as "the evil one". They consider themselves to be the good one. Thus, in opposition to "good and bad morality",

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“good and evil morality” came as a rejection of the noble class. It reflected the poisonous attitude of *ressentiment* towards everything that was noble and powerful (209).

Nietzsche believes that Christianity considers the highest spiritual values as sinful, deceptive, and tempting. He also maintains that pity is contrary to the law of development. It defends declining values and whatever is hostile to life. Nietzsche links pity with nihilism and the negation of life. For Nietzsche, though pity is considered to be a source of all virtues, yet it becomes a weakness in noble morality. Nietzsche attacks both the idealist and the priest for their nature. They show "disdain for 'understanding', the 'senses', 'honour', 'the good life', and 'science' (*Anti-Christ* 8). Nietzsche condemns priest by calling him the professional negater, slanderer, and poisoner of life (8). He holds the view that until we stop believing in priest, we cannot find any answer to the questions of what truth is. Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* refers to “the great hermeneutical conflict between the priest and the philologist.

In his *Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche rejects the idea of absolute truth. He argues that Christian God is no longer the real God that deviate people from reason, knowledge, and enquiry. For Nietzsche, God is not God in the real sense if he does not represent the scornful, cunning, and envious feelings to raise the status of humans in society. Nietzsche also introduces two opposing concepts: noble morality and resentment morality. Nietzsche argues that Christianity developed in the late Roman Empire that filled the minds of timid slaves with poisonous feelings. The concepts of honesty, spirit, masculinity, pride, beauty, and the freedom of the heart became evil for them due to opposite feelings. Nietzsche argues that the priests introduced the weakest morality by inventing the concepts of troubles, death, hardship, and illness to stop people from thinking.

For Badiou, Philosophy always poses a new questions or examines old questions in a new light. He shows a unique relationship of philosophy with desire, truth, politics, psychoanalysis, art, and cinema. Badiou states that philosophy has four generic truth procedures -- love, art, science, and politics. He does not include religion and God in the category of truth procedure. He emphasises the idea of singular subject. Evil can be cured only if the subject is willing to take steps against this. He argues that there is evil if the humanity is not emancipated. He blames liberal capitalism and democracy to spread evil in the society. For him, democracy cannot be possible in the capitalism. He also exposes the ideologies of Fascism and Communism that appear different but they are similar. Badiou argues that the egalitarian politics has not resolved the power of state. The politics exercised in the name of emancipation becomes terror only. Badiou argues that evil is not constrained within the area of liberal capitalism only, rather it will change its way the moment it is subordinated to humanistic and Christian morality. Thus, Badiou wants to rise above the traditional idea of Christian morality, and wants to find evil beneath Good in the context of singular subject. Badiou *Ethics* “could be seen as a highly sublimated challenge for all that could be named as totalitarian universal, metaphysics of our time” (Jevremovic). The book also sheds light on the totalitarian nature of western countries in the guise of democracy a tension between America and Europe, and the American imperialism and European slavery. Badiou calls it democratic totalitarianism (Jevremovic).

Badiou, like Nietzsche, starts his enquiry into the theory of good in order to understand evil. He clarifies that if we go on proposing another theory of evil, then it is natural that another theory of good will emerge out of it. If we compromise on the particular question of good, then it becomes evil. There is evil if we cease to find the truth behind the situation. There is evil if we stop to follow politics that may liberate humanity from evil. As he says, “Evil is the moment when I lack the strength to be true to the Good that compels me” (Cox and Whalen). There is evil if the subject becomes egoistic for his own self-interest. One becomes de-subjectivized in the egoistic self-interest and interrupts the progress of a truth. As Badiou says: “one can, then, define evil in one phrase: evil is the interruption of a truth by the pressure of particular individual interests” (Cox and Whalen).

Badiou mentions both external and internal evil. He is aware of the fact that every subject is a mixture of multiple of beings, and this multiple of beings refers further to an infinite number of beings. He answers that everyone is capable of doing everything. He mentions that we have seen good people becoming torturers over insignificant things. The idea of this human species is rooted in animal species. He mentions that this whole process of brutalizing other lies in the lack of goodness which we must have for others. He ascribes good and evil to the rules of impulses. The question of evil arises when one proclaims the good and the others renounce it.

Badiou rejects the idea of natural morality and formal morality propounded by Rousseau and Kant, respectively. He maintains that the natural state of human animal has nothing to do with good and evil. Badiou argues that the natural state of human animal has no connection with good and evil. Like Nietzsche, he also gives the example of Roman civilization where torture was not a part of evil. Badiou further maintains that there are circumstances where cruelty becomes necessary, and there are situations where pity becomes a contempt for others. It is difficult to base the concept of good and evil in the structure of human animal. So the idea of torture has nothing to do with good and evil. Like Nietzsche, he also rejects Kant's “Categorical Imperatives”. He argues that the becoming-subject depends not upon us, but on the singular situations. Evil exists only in context of a subject, but not for a pre-subjectivized human animal.

According to Badiou, “Contemporary ethics” is intrinsically conservative and regulative. He believes that Contemporary ethics presumes a priori evil that comes in the form of violence and suffering. A defensive ethics on the basis of “human rights” is imposed upon people by contemporary ethics. Badiou informs us that this contemporary ethics has become a dynamic relational discourse where few are suffering as objects in the hands of those who are practicing such ethics. Contemporary ethics attempts to protect the “marginalized”, excluded, or 'Third World' victims. Badiou in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* exposes the ideologies of the western countries that work for the welfare of Third World (xiii). Badiou ascribes the singularity of evil to the singularity of politics. He gives the example of Nazis politics that was nothing less than a false event. For Badiou, there are three dimensions of truth-process: event, fidelity, and truth. Event, according to Badiou, is something which brings to pass ‘something other’ than the situation, opinions, and instituted knowledge.

Badiou further describes evil in the context of these three dimensions of truth process. He gives three forms of evil: Simulacrum (related to the event), Betrayal (related to the fidelity), and the forcing of the unnamable (related to the power of the true). Badiou explains the first form of evil that is simulacrum and terror from the point of view of Nazi politics. Badiou clarifies that every subject or 'some-one' faces a moments of crisis in the truth process, though this truth- process remains untouched by crisis. This truth process initiated by an event goes to the extent of infinity. Badiou opines that it is possible for the truth-process to name and evaluate all the elements of the objective situation. He emphasises the power of subjective language that is able to change the world. Every element could be judged in the given context. This element could also be named and judged through the discourse between human animals. Badiou gives us the idea that in order to understand the singularity of truth, we must communicate and express our ideas. We ourselves are the exposure to the becoming-subject. There is no history without our own. The world will remain beneath the true and the false (85). It is beneath good and evil. The good is hidden beneath the singularity of truth. The power of truth is also a kind of powerlessness (85).

It means that the false truth cannot reduce the reliability of the power of truth. Badiou argues that if the power of truth shows its absoluteness then it becomes evil. This evil attempts to eliminate the opinions of the human animals. Badiou calls this form of evil as disaster. The truth which is induced by the absoluteness of its power, such a truth with its total power is unable to name all the elements of the situation. There is also a category of opinions and the languages of the situation. Badiou calls this element the unnamable of a truth. At last, Badiou says that we have the potential to name the unnamable in the language of the situation, though it is difficult to determine in the case of a particular type of truth-process as in love, mathematics, or politics. "Evil in this case is to want, at all costs and under condition of truths to force the naming of the unnamable, and it is the principle of disaster" (Hallward 86).

In conclusion, it may be stated that the idea of evil has considerably changed from nineteenth century to present time. Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century, throws a major challenge by considering evil in a new light. He enables philosophers to ask fundamental questions about evil from an entirely new perspective. He introduces two opposing concepts: 'noble morality' and '*ressentiment* morality' for a better understanding of evil. *Ressentiment* morality refers to the rejection of everything that affirms life, such as success, power, and beauty. It views affirmation of life as evil and reprehensible. Nietzsche considers evil specifically in the context of Christian morality that, according to him, has made human beings too weak and impotent to stand up against anything that is life-denying.

Nietzsche argues that with the rejection of universal moral law human beings have led themselves to nihilism. Just as he charted a new course of thinking about evil, Badiou has done the same in our time. Badiou, like Nietzsche, challenges the way evil has been considered in modern times. The idea about God's existence is no longer prevalent in the present time. Unlike Nietzsche, Badiou does not even include God in his truth procedure. He considers evil as it appears in the wake of the mass horrors of the twentieth century, particularly the atrocities in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Cambodia under Pol Pot. Following

Nietzsche, he also starts his enquiry with evil instead of good. Like Nietzsche, he also rejects Kant's "categorical imperative". He considers evil as something deeply subjective. He is also following the legacy of Nietzsche by rejecting the popular situations. He warns us against any political or religious groups that propagate as a simulacrum of truth. He mentions three types of evil: first, the simulacrum of truth as an actual truth; second, the betrayal of fidelity to the process of truth; third, imposition of one's own truth as an absolute on others by means of the power of terror. All these three types of evil are prevalent in the modern times. While Nietzsche remains relevant, he is no longer sufficient if we are to understand our world. For this, Badiou's ideas are needed today.

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