# Evil's Empire

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In a lecture delivered around the end of the Second World War, Jean-Paul Sartre spoke about one of his students, who had sought his advice on how to deal with a moral dilemma he was facing. This student's father was estranged from his mother, and had even collaborated with the German authorities, whereas the student's elder brother had been killed defending France during the German invasion in 1940. Sartre's student was moved by a desire to avenge his brother and contribute to the effort against Germany, but he also felt responsibility towards his elderly mother, with whom he lived, and who needed his help. Should he go to England and join the forces of the Free French, or stay with his mother? Sartre depicts his predicament:

> He fully realized that this woman only lived for him, and that his disappearance—or perhaps his death—would plunge her into despair. He also realized that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother's behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or

> Algiers, he might be put into an office to fill out forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed only toward one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous—and it might be frustrated on the way.[1]

Sartre brings this anecdote to illustrate the failure of the various doctrines of Western moral philosophy to address the real dilemmas which face man. Traditional Christian ethics, as Sartre understands it, teaches only that one should "act with charity, love your neighbor, deny yourself for others, choose the way which is hardest."[2] Such an imperative, however, does not define that "way which is hardest," nor does it specify what are the particular goals that merit such sacrifice: Personal devotion to one's mother, or perhaps the obligation to defend one's homeland? Kantian ethical theory is scarcely more helpful: If the student were to adopt the categorical imperative, according to which people are always to be treated as an "end" and never merely as a "means,"[3] he would find that both courses of action run the risk of transgression: If he stays with his mother, he has turned the soldiers into a mere means for the preservation of his country and home; but if he goes off to war, he strips his mother of her status as an end by ignoring her needs, which only he can fulfill. A similar problem is encountered when one attempts to apply "intuitional" ethics, which ascribes a central role to emotions and instincts in moral decisionmaking. As Sartre points out, it is very difficult to assess the weight of emotions, and even harder to distinguish between true and apparent feelings. Moreover, emotions are frequently the products of our actions, and cannot therefore be reliably consulted as a basis for setting a course of action. After demonstrating the weakness of the various ethical theories, Sartre reaches the conclusion that the student's decision cannot be anchored in any general theory of morality; he must choose in a completely free manner, for "there are no signposts to guide us in this world."[4]

Moral philosophy, as Sartre illustrates, is in the throes of a deep crisis. More than any other philosophical field, it must withstand the test of practicability—since, as Immanuel Kant observed, the entire purpose of ethical theory is to offer guidance in the decisions that must be made in real life.[5] But in the centuries since Kant, moral thought has managed to distance itself from living, concrete reality. The schools that have developed—Kantian ethics and utilitarianism are two major examples—still hold sway with professors of philosophy, but are of hardly any use outside the academy. Their attempt to constrict the awesome complexity of human life into a set of universally valid rules has given them an abstract and alienated character, and rendered them incapable of exercising any real influence on the way people behave. In recent decades, even some prominent scholars have come to accept the chronic sterility of the field of moral philosophy, with a few of them going as far as to call into question the very possibility of a comprehensive and applicable theory of ethics.[6]

Thus it is no small matter when a philosopher publishes a major work proposing to set forth, comprehensively and systematically, a new theory of ethics. *Speaking Evil: Towards an Ontology of Morals* by Adi Ophir is, first and foremost, a courageous effort. The author, from the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University, is an important figure in Israeli cultural life; in the past decade he has emerged as a prominent and articulate spokesman for the postmodernist position, which has become quite popular in intellectual life both within the university and outside of it. As founding editor of the journal *Theory and Criticism*, Ophir has already made a significant contribution to the intellectual debate within Israel. With *Speaking Evil*, Ophir has built upon this achievement, producing what is possibly the first major philosophical work of the modern era that was entirely "thought and written in Hebrew," as he puts it. It is a depressing fact that original Israeli philosophy is not a common thing, and Ophir is to be lauded for providing the exception. In the depleted atmosphere of philosophical discourse in Israel, *Speaking Evil* is a breath of fresh air.

The importance of Ophir's book, however, goes beyond the local context. *Speaking Evil* proposes "an orderly and methodical exploration of moral theory" that seeks to lead to no less than "a redefinition of what constitutes the morally worthy."[7] And this it does in the spirit of postmodernist thought, to which the author admits his "explicit" debt.[8] Moreover, Ophir emphasizes in the introduction that his work constitutes "an additional step in the secularization that Western thought has undergone since the beginning of the modern era."[9] According to Ophir, the method proposed in *Speaking Evil* addresses moral problems in a way that is unequivocally this-worldly and secular, disabused of the last traces of transcendence that have accompanied modern ethical philosophy. The significance of such a promise is not to be underrated: As Ophir himself attests, he seeks to present us with the ultimate secular theory of morality.

*Speaking Evil* is a serious, thorough, and wide-ranging work, on which its author labored for close to a decade. Its four hundred dense pages are characterized by an inquisitive and restless tone which testifies to the continuous searching of Ophir's penetrating and dynamic mind. Yet the method that Ophir proposes ultimately fails, and for the same reasons that have sealed the fate of other theories of morality which it seeks to replace: It does not convince the reader of its ability to offer man a reasonable and practicable method for maintaining a moral life. In the practical realm it is almost completely impotent: It divests moral practice of any element of simplicity or naturalness, imposes impossible conditions on anyone seeking to act morally, and forces people to make practical decisions in a world that seems hopeless and beyond repair. Anyone seriously accepting the principles of Ophir's theory will find himself powerless to apply them, not only in the face of acute dilemmas, but even in the more mundane decisions of everyday life. Instead of restoring our faith in the possibility of moral philosophy, as Ophir explicitly sought to do, *Speaking Evil* only undermines it further.

## II

The main innovation in *Speaking Evil* is the point of departure that Ophir chooses, which is already hinted at in the title. While most theories of morality are based on the "good in itself" as the aim of ethics, or, alternatively, on the derivation of moral obligations from specific values such as justice, liberty, and equality, Ophir places the focus on evil, which has traditionally had a marginal role in moral philosophy. This move is necessitated, in his mind, by the failure of such "positive" approaches to offer a solid foundation for moral philosophy in Western thought.

So it is, for example, with notions of the "good in itself." Ophir argues that "we know nothing about the good," or, more specifically, "we have no idea of what the 'good in itself' is. We have no conception of 'good'—the good is not a concept."[10] What we have instead is clear knowledge of those specific elements, tangible and intangible, which make life more tolerable; but "good" itself, as a general concept, is not identical with these goods, and it cannot be based on them. After critiquing a number of conceptions of the good in classical Greek thought (which identified it with happiness), in Kantian theory (which viewed it as an idea that cannot be perceived by the senses) and in utilitarian philosophy (which based it on the maximization of benefit or pleasure), Ophir reaches the conclusion that "the good in itself cannot be discerned by looking at its effects within the world."[11] The good is always missing, always in the state of not-yet or no-longer; every discussion of good is founded on allegories ("the happy smile of a child, the tranquility of a house in the country, a man and woman embracing, the grateful look of an unfortunate whose cries have been heeded")[12] that allude to the good that is absent. The only alternative, Ophir maintains, is to relate to some kind of transcendent, perfect good beyond our own experience—something which cannot be addressed by a moral philosophy which places

itself within the bounds of the worldly and the tangible. Within secular moral thought, Ophir concludes, there is no room for "the good."

Ophir's strategy of circumventing the good as an idea has been advanced before, and is characteristic of modern liberal thought. According to the latter view, our despair at the prospect of identifying the "good" should lead moral philosophy to pursue more modest goals, such as a clear notion of "justice," which may be a more fruitful basis for ethical discourse. According to the theory proposed by John Rawls, for example, we do not need to attain knowledge of the good to establish a just society; a proper social order that enables the fair resolution of disputes among various value systems is sufficient.[13] Ophir takes issue with such efforts, arguing that such notions of the "just" can never be divorced from the cultural context in which they are created. "Values," Ophir writes, "are the creations of a judicial, political, ideological, or religious discourse; they function as tools with a more or less defined role in the given culture."[14] Here Ophir is clearly adopting the postmodernist perspective, which denies any external, objective vantage point that could allow us to identify absolute or objective values. Instead of setting forth a vision of society based on an absolute concept of justice, Ophir maintains, these theories define justice in accordance with their prior assumptions concerning the desired social model. The only way out of this trap is to understand in advance that all the pretensions of ethical systems that are based on one or another universal value are without foundation. He therefore proposes an ethical discourse utterly lacking in values—a "value-free discourse," as he puts it.[15]

Ophir takes the first step towards such a discourse by basing his moral philosophy on the idea of evil. Since Plato, evil has frequently been perceived as the absence of good. Ophir essentially reverses this perception; he argues that the presence of evil in the real world, in contrast to that of good, is positive and tangible: "Evil is part of what there is; much of what exists is suffused with evil."[16] While the idea of the good evaporates upon careful examination, evil only becomes more real, more definite. The evil that concerns Ophir is not the absence of good, or the manifestation of some

metaphysical, diabolical element; rather, it is "part of reality, of the everyday, the routine, and the orderly."[17] We need no definition of the good, no belief in the absolute validity of any value, in order to sense the reality of evil, in order to encounter cases of suffering, distress, cruelty, arbitrariness, and exploitation. Ophir's focus on evil enables him to overcome the problem of relativism and to anchor the moral imperative in something "absolute": Instead of striving for some abstract or transcendent "good," he calls upon us to struggle against a tangible "evil," the reality of which cannot be denied.

In the first two parts of *Speaking Evil*, Ophir analyzes the nature of evil and the manner in which it is experienced by man. This discussion is close in spirit to the phenomenological method employed by thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Emmanuel Levinas, which seeks to describe fundamental human experiences, freed of any assumptions or prior expectations. It attempts to return, in Husserl's words, to "the facts themselves."[18] Ophir does not accept the basic assumption of this school of thought, that the human experience can be stripped of social and cultural conditioning; like the phenomenologists, however, he seeks to expose the essential foundations underlying that experience. Specifically, he proposes to reduce all the categories with which evil has traditionally been associated in the ethical tradition—cruelty, humiliation, lust, self-love, arrogance—to two basic types of personal experience: "Damage" and "suffering."[19] According to Ophir, these terms reflect two opposing types of experience: Damage is fundamentally negative, involving a sense of the loss of something in which we have an interest—such as the theft of one's property, or the death of a relative or friend. Suffering, on the other hand, is positive—a real, if undesirable, sensation such as physical pain or anxiety. Based on this distinction, Ophir depicts all evil in terms of its two modes: One of the loss of a presence, the other of its gain.[20]

These two experiences join together in the third part of the book, which takes up almost half the work, in which Ophir sets forth the principles of his ethical system. Here he draws a further distinction, between what he

calls "evils" (*ra'a* or, in the plural, *ra'ot*), referring to all events or phenomena involving the worsening of someone's situation—that is, all damage or suffering; and "evil" (*roa*) as a wider term, which he describes as "the generic name for the sum total of unnecessary evils."[21] According to Ophir, damage or suffering may be justified under certain conditions. There are evils which are necessary, in that they inflict a cost that is lower than the damage and suffering that would result from their absence. An unnecessary evil, on the other hand, cannot be justified, and is not to be accepted under any circumstances, since its prevention would not increase the sum total of evils in a given system. When, for example, an obese person undertakes a strict diet and, as a result, endures hunger and distress, this evil can be justified for health reasons, since we could point clearly to the danger to his life if he were not to act. On the other hand, the starvation experienced by children in the Sudan cannot be justified; this evil is completely unnecessary.

The latter kind of evil, according to Ofir, is, by definition, not necessary; but at the same time, it is also not accidental. Ophir draws our attention to the methodical, purposive aspects of evil as they appear in the patterns and order of human life. "It is possible to speak about the production and distribution of evils," he writes, "in the same way that we speak of goods or merchandise: Examining the 'factories' where they are produced, the relations and means of production, the patterns of distribution and trade, and even the ways in which they are 'consumed.'"[22] Under the unmistakable influence of Marxism, Ophir points to the organized creation of evil, which manifests itself in all realms of society: Economics, politics, culture, the military, religion. The needless evils produced by this system are not always the result of deliberate choice; they are frequently an unintended byproduct of rational decisionmaking. For example, it would be difficult to find people who genuinely want to see others forced to live on the streets, but the homeless poor have nonetheless become a fixture of the urban landscape in America; similarly, there are cases in which criminal and judicial procedures result in the wrongful conviction and harsh punishment of innocents; and sometimes medication results in serious side effects or

addiction, whose consequences may be worse than the malady that the treatment was meant to cure.

The fact that evil is so deeply entrenched in the social order might lead one to wonder whether, in the final analysis, it is not quite so superfluous after all. Ophir himself underscores the fact that evil is not to be viewed as a disruption of the orderly operation of society, but is rather an "immanent part" of its nature: "Such is the case," he writes, "with road accidents, which seem to be built in to the rubric of modern life, and which we must accept as a package deal together with the automobile and the highway; or the 'plague of drugs,' or white-collar crimes and corruption scandals. And perhaps we may also speak in similar terms about diseases such as cancer and AIDS."[23] Yet despite the fatalistic tone of his account of modern life, Ophir insists that many of these evils—even if they are an integral part of our lives—are unnecessary, because they may, in theory, be exchanged for lesser ones.

Ophir's conviction that it is possible to reduce the amount of superfluous evil in the world stands at the heart of the practical conclusions offered in *Speaking Evil*. If it were not so, if evil could not be offset or prevented, it would be impossible to speak of morality:

> The fact that it is always possible… to restrict evils or to intensify them by means of social action, by means of administration, control, and resistance, is what makes the desirable (the reduction of evils) into the possible; the fact that evils are always unnecessary for those who suffer them is what makes part of the possible (the reduction of evils) into the desirable.[24]

The aim of Ophir's philosophical effort, then, is to formulate as precisely as possible the central moral obligation facing man: "The removal of unnecessary evil."[25] The struggle against the "surpluses" of evil replaces the attempt to realize the good: The focus of our moral efforts is not "generosity or decency, but rather the humiliation and insult that can be avoided and eradicated. Not virtue, but needlessly base behavior, whose consequences must be prevented."[26]

In order to make this practicable, Ophir sets out a strategy for the realization of the moral imperative, guided by what he calls "practical wisdom (*phronesis*),"[27] a term first employed by Aristotle, who defines it in his *Ethics* as "a true state, reasoned and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man."[28] In this work Aristotle—in clear opposition to his mentor Plato—distinguishes between practical wisdom, which is concerned with human affairs, and scientific knowledge, which is related to "things that are necessarily so," such as the laws of natural science. Accordingly, practical wisdom prefers experience to knowledge, and the specific and the concrete to the general and the abstract (for, Aristotle writes, practical wisdom "must take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances"). What is required is the ability to respond appropriately to changing circumstances, while carefully and thoughtfully weighing the possibilities that inhere in them. Consequently, the man of practical wisdom is "the one who can aim, by help of his calculation, at the best of the goods attainable by man."[29]

The Aristotelian idea that there is no need for universal rules in order to apply moral judgment in different circumstances naturally suits Ophir's own philosophical tastes (in this Ophir is similar to the postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard, whose book *Just Gaming*, on the idea of justice, borrows from Aristotelian ethics).[30] But because he rejects the possibility of knowing "the good," Ophir inverts the Aristotelian equation: Instead of maximizing the good that may be derived from any given situation, Ophir contends, man is to choose that course of action which minimizes unnecessary evils. According to Ophir, it is this calculative element that keeps him safe from the abyss of moral relativism, for "at any given moment there can be only one true answer to the question of which principled conception, which strategy of action, and which patterns of discourse among those available in a given situation may limit the 'volume' of superfluous evils."[31]

In this respect, Ophir's philosophy looks much like utilitarianism, which posits that moral actions are to be determined as the product of a

rational calculation aimed at maximizing total benefits and minimizing total costs, rather than according to fixed, abstract principles. Ophir himself writes that "the desire to reduce the volume of evils is simply an inverse formulation of the desire to maximize general happiness or benefit."[32] These two approaches, however, differ markedly in the nature of their ethical calculations: While the utilitarianists are interested in profit and loss as seen from the perspective of the community or society, which in turn are perceived as extensions of the individual's own self, Ophir's theory is guided by a concern for the "other," for individuals or groups which are precisely not extensions of the moral actor, but are alien to him. "The moral interest," he writes, "is interest in the other, who is mired (or in danger of becoming mired) in his distress, in his suffering, in concern for his own welfare…. The ethical knowledge is guided by an interest in the unnecessary evils that befall others or threaten to befall them; moral judgment and the intentions behind moral activity are guided by a concern for others who are afflicted by unnecessary evils."[33]

This ethical interest in the "other" is what places Ophir's theory squarely in the postmodernist camp, distinguishing it from earlier schools such as utilitarianism. The ethical discussion of the other is principally identified with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, which had a lasting effect on the leading figures of postmodernist philosophy, including Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Zygmunt Bauman. Levinas maintains that ethics is based on the limitless and unconditional devotion to the other—a mindset which he describes as a kind of obsession, an absolute devotion.[34] This attachment takes precedence over any value, any conception that reflects a particular social order; it is part of the mold that shapes subjectivity itself. "Moral consciousness," Levinas stresses, "is not an experience of values, but an access to external being: External being par excellence is the other."[35] Levinas demands that the moral subject recognize his own absolute distinction from the other, and that he deny the urge to see himself in the other or seek any other common element. One must not project oneself onto the other, or, even worse, relate to the other as an object or

abstraction. As a result, one's dedication to helping others cannot be based on any "objective" conception of the interpersonal realm, in which our moral concern is justified because these people are part of our family or society, or even because they are human beings "just like us." On the contrary, our concern for the other is purely subjective, a total devotion to another in his alien reality.[36]

Ophir adopts this moral perspective. Like Levinas (and to some extent following Kant as well), he rejects the philosophical tradition that attempted to base moral behavior on the promise of reward or self-fulfillment. He stresses the asymmetry inherent in man's moral obligation: "Answering the call of the other means conceding and giving without receiving anything in return."[37] Being responsive means sacrificing one's own interest; the appropriate attitude toward the other disregards all considerations based on personal affinity or inclination. Although Ophir does not completely reject such interests in all of human decisionmaking, he places them outside the bounds of moral discourse. In this he sides with those thinkers who, in the name of a Kantian universalism, have over the centuries called for a completely egalitarian attitude towards all people. Of these, perhaps the leading advocate today is Martha Nussbaum, who has written that to behave morally means "to treat nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, race, and gender as 'morally irrelevant'—as irrelevant to that equal standing.… The accident of being born a Sri Lankan, or a Jew, or a female, or an African-American, or a poor person, is just that—an accident of birth. It is not and should not be taken to be a determinant of moral worth. Human personhood… is the source of our moral worth, and this worth is equal."[38]

## III

The enlistment of "practical wisdom" in the service of a limitless devotion to the other is no simple matter. The term that Ophir uses for this demand, the "rational calculus of waste," highlights the nature of the problem: On the one hand, Ophir subordinates moral action to practical reasoning, to a completely rational method of calculation; on the other hand, he demands from this reasoning "a type of absorption into the other, devotion without limits, an absurd investment, sacrifice and extravagance."[39] But this is to demand far more than the most generous of human conduct. The insistence upon sacrificing all personal interests, in a calculated fashion, on the altar of the "other" (even—perhaps primarily—on behalf of complete strangers), to act *rationally* in utter selflessness whenever called upon to do so, is something that no reasonable person can be expected to undertake, because it violates human nature, our understanding of rationality, and common sense.

But what makes Ophir's moral theory not only extremely difficult to implement, but quite impossible, are the conditions he imposes upon anyone seeking to act ethically. The first obstacle lies in his demand to base practical reasoning on the processing of information that cannot be measured, and that originates primarily in the subjective experiences of the other. Without being able to share the actual experiences of the other, without being able to measure them and weigh them in light of different options available, it is pointless to speak of a "rational calculus" of the type Ophir requires. Ophir, who is aware of this difficulty, contends that those evils to which man is supposed to respond—the damage and suffering caused to the other—are actually an objective matter, and can be identified even when the victim is not aware of them. The coal miner who suffers cumulative damage to his lungs, the woman who lives in an oppressive

patriarchal society, are the victims of repression and exploitation without their necessarily knowing it. They need "others, who can adopt a paternalistic or missionary stance," in order to bring about a change in their consciousness and reveal to them the unnecessary evils from which they are suffering.[40]

Now, it is difficult to deny that people frequently suffer real, objective evils without their knowledge (even if we take issue with one or another of Ophir's specific examples). The problem, however, is that Ophir simultaneously insists upon the subjectivity of evil, devoting a considerable portion of his massive study to the *feelings* of damage and suffering as the basis for all moral calculation. Thus, for example, he explains that in order to determine the damage involved in the loss of property, "it does not suffice to determine the occurrence of the transition from presence to absence and from being to not being; it is also necessary to determine the interest of the affected party in what has disappeared and cannot be replaced."[41] The phenomenon of loss cannot be separated from this personal feeling: When someone loses a unique photograph that captures an important moment from his past, the sense of loss corresponds in no way to any measure of the picture's "objective" value (its market price, for example). His interest in the photograph is completely subjective, and his suffering ensues from the fact that he has lost something of "sentimental value," the significance of which lies in his private memory. The attempt by someone else to estimate this sense of loss "objectively," in order to set damages or as part of some other moral calculation, is doomed to failure. The distress of the other always remains beyond my full perception, no matter how empathetic and attentive I may be.

This gap widens when the "other" is himself incapable of expressing his sense of loss and suffering in terms that I am capable of understanding. This situation, which Lyotard calls *differend*, limits my ability to respond to his distress, since there is no higher forum in which the gap between different fields of discourse may be bridged. Without a common language, an aggrieved party will often find himself unable to express his position. As

Lyotard puts it, "it is in the nature of the victim not to be able to prove that injustice has been caused him."[42] When the quality and extent of the loss cannot be articulated, the moral actor has no access to the victim's subjective state, and the latter is deprived of any hope of redress.

*Speaking Evil* offers no real solution to this problem. While Ophir does think that there ought to be some agreed-upon system of exchange or form of discourse by which the gap may somehow be bridged and injustices measured and made good, he nonetheless is forced to admit that "there is no 'meta-language' capable of bridging, once and for all, between competing systems of discourse."[43] The injustice suffered by the other may remain incapable of being addressed, for when the moral actor cannot understand the expressions of the other's distress, it is unreasonable to expect him to respond properly. Ophir confirms that at times the injustice is "a result of the limitations of discourse"[44]—an evil that, while unnecessary, cannot be demonstrated, since it exceeds the bounds of what can be expressed.

These barriers between the moral actor and the other raise serious doubts about the "rational calculus of waste" as a basis for morality. In the absence of objective data, calculation gives way to conjecture and guesswork—a shaky foundation for what purports to be a firm ethical method that is to offer guidance in genuine dilemmas, in which the subject is forced to decide which course of action will serve the "other" in a better fashion.

As if this were not enough to undermine our faith in a postmodernist "practical wisdom" as a guide for moral decisionmaking, Ophir weakens it further by pointing to a second epistemological barrier facing the moral actor: Not only is he barred from ever fully understanding the other's distress, he is also unable to grasp the impossibly complex methods of operation of the vast social structure in which he is supposed to act—a giant web in which the moral actor is a fly forever trapped. "In this net, which is at once limited and open to the infinite, there are innumerable (because they cannot be numbered) patterns of behavior that are intertwined and interwoven, which incessantly change and undo the changes, over and over, in order to repeatedly create the impression of their permanence."[45] This

image of unending dismantling and assembling, of a fabric that is constantly growing and changing, of the expansion, reproduction, and dissemination of the patterns that create evil, owes much to the thought of the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and, specifically, to their description of the social order as a "rhizome"—an anarchic thicket of connections, divisions, and intersections without beginning or end, which grows in all directions at once.[46]

Given the complexity of evil, the aspiration of moral philosophy to serve as a reliable guide begins to look like an empty pretension. Man cannot weigh the ethical possibilities facing him if he lacks the tools to decipher the reality in which he lives; he cannot assess the likelihood that his actions will in fact lead to a reduction of unnecessary evils if the math required for such a calculation is far beyond his abilities. Only one certainty remains: Unnecessary evils, in whatever form, lie in wait at every turn. "We can never know if the deed will not generate more unnecessary evils than those that it is meant to limit or eliminate," Ophir writes. "There is little doubt that it will create evils that, from someone's perspective, will be unnecessary."[47]

Under these conditions, the moral reasoning of whose practicality Ophir has aimed his entire work at convincing us becomes abstract and ephemeral, offering scant hope for anyone actually wishing to put it into practice. When the reasonable person facing a moral dilemma cannot fully understand the "other" whose subjective suffering he is expected to remedy, when he is lacking the basic tools for understanding the world in which his actions are supposed to achieve redress, and when his only certainty is of the evil that he will ineluctably produce, he is sentenced to moral paralysis.

## IV

The picture becomes darker still, however, when Ophir informs his readers of the awesome, daunting forces with which the moral actor is supposed to contend. In his account, the rule of evil in human reality is almost total; its presence in the world is boundless and all-inclusive. These chilling conclusions, of course, are a predictable outcome of his initial premise: By insisting that only evil is tangible in the world, Ophir chooses a path that necessarily leads to fatalistic pessimism. Inspired by postmodernist political theory, which sees exploitation and repression lurking behind every corner, he ends up finding manifestations of evil everywhere. Although Ophir notes that "in the spaces between the islands of ordered evil" it is possible to discover moments of tranquility, triumph, and elevation, such moments are rare and fleeting. "We have not yet reached the peak of the curve" of accumulated evils in the world, he writes, but the increase of evil appears to be unstoppable; its apex can already be seen on the horizon.[48]

Towards its conclusion, *Speaking Evil* begins to take on an apocalyptic tone. In the ninth chapter, which addresses "The Present Era," Ophir explores the daily intensification of evil through the processes of modernization and globalization, and the "tremendous growth in the modern period in the extent, range, frequency, intensity, and diversity of the evils that are created and disseminated through social means."[49] What appears to the naive observer as social, political, economic, or technological progress also brings about, sometimes intentionally, further improvement in the means of production of evils, and the increased efficiency of "the social order, which is capable of creating ever more sophisticated patterns for generating evils, and which is in truth incapable of existing without them."[50] With the tractor came the tank; with the airliner came the long-range

bomber; and with penicillin came nerve gas. "The 'ascent of man,'" Ophir explains, "is intrinsically bound up with the improvement of the means to impose evil, as well as their penetration into the division of labor and the social order, which have become increasingly complex."[51] Ophir pins the blame on the capitalist economy and the nation-state, which he considers to be "the two most powerful systems producing and distributing unnecessary evils."[52] Above all he finds the functioning of "market forces" to be the highest expression of the patterns of creating and spreading evil. Although he concedes that they also were responsible for "wide-ranging changes in the ability to extend aid and alleviate suffering in all spheres,"[53] he nonetheless charges them with causing "the appearance of evils of a magnitude and range previously unknown in history": The flourishing arms trade, international drug trafficking, the scandalous exploitation of cheap labor in Third World countries, and more.[54] "The globalization of evil," he writes, "marches hand in hand with the other processes of globalization: Of the economy, of transportation and communications, of war and tourism, of the balance of fear, of international relations. Poverty, unemployment, disease, environmental pollution, terror, drugs—all of these know no borders."[55]

This indictment of human civilization reaches its climax in his discussion of the meaning of Auschwitz—the place on earth where evil appeared "in its clearest, purest form."[56] Auschwitz, he stresses, "was of this world";[57] he rejects—cautiously, it must be noted—the temptation to ascribe to Auschwitz a kind of "sanctity," to transform it into something "incomparable."[58] For Ophir, the Nazi death factories were not a monstrous exception to the human norm, but rather its highest expression: Just as the other catastrophes of postmodernity—nuclear disaster, ecological holocaust, mass terror, AIDS—are an "immanent part of the way the integrated systems work,"[59] Auschwitz, too, is the culmination of the "superfluity" of evil which the modern era produces with dizzying speed. This is a development of an argument that is especially popular in postmodernist thought, one that looks at the Holocaust as the quintessence of Western culture and modernity, and of their systematic oppression of the other. "In the

apocalypse at Auschwitz," writes the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarth, "it is no more or less than the essence of the West that is revealed—and that has not ceased since that time to reveal itself."[60]

Yet Ophir does not content himself with condemnation of the modern West. His indictment spans the entirety of human society, which he sees, by its very nature, as a mechanism of evil. In this sense, the destruction of European Jewry was not a betrayal of mankind, but its full exposure in all its monstrosity: "If Auschwitz is a model," he writes, "perhaps this is not because it is a symbol of human corruption, but because it symbolizes the realization of the human potential?"[61]

Faced with this postmodernist nightmare, it is hard to avoid a sense of futility. A reality so dark, in which evil spreads like an unstoppable plague, offers little hope. Ophir himself admits that this "systematic, almost holistic perception of the production of evil places all the blame on humans, but leaves very little hope for change."[62] The entrenchment of evil in the different systems in which our daily lives are intertwined is so complete that there is hardly any point in trying to improve them. Ophir writes that education, for example, "is not a tool for the lessening of evil, but rather a collection of mechanisms for its duplication";[63] generally speaking, the intervention by wealthy countries and international humanitarian organizations to alleviate the suffering of the Third World only augments the mechanisms for the production and spread of evils—since accompanying the diplomatic pressures to improve human rights is always the motivation of economic liberalization and the desire of industrialized nations to penetrate the markets of poverty-stricken countries.[64]

Since very little can be gained from trying to improve the system from within, only one substantive option remains for the moral actor: Subversion. This, in essence, is the moral mission that Ophir assigns to man: "To sabotage the patterns of production of unnecessary evils, to stop their duplication, to halt the machinery that reproduces evil."[65] "To sabotage," "to stop," "to halt"—at the end of the arduous path on which *Speaking Evil* leads us, Ophir's monumental work reveals itself to be little more than

another anti-establishment manifesto. Any hope the reader may have had of discovering a substantial moral program is dashed upon reading the actual practical ideas that the author proposes. After agonizing over the kinds of actions that will give force to his moral call, all Ophir can muster are the tired tactics of public protest:

> Just as one strike in a factory can launch a wave of strikes that will cripple the economy and frustrate government policy, just as one petition can get people to take to the streets and trigger civil opposition to war—certain actions possess some chance, something greater than zero, of effecting a breakdown in the patterns of the production of evils in a particular realm, in a certain period of time, in a certain sector.[66]

In other instances, Ophir recommends the tactics of internal subversion: "It may be more effective to try and engage in viral activity that disrupts systems through the operation of the tools of the systems themselves, instead of attempting to stop them in a head-on collision."[67] Finally, if other means are not effective, a strategy of opting out may be the only recourse: "Frequently, the only thing possible is to refrain from participating in the systems of discourse and action that create evil in practice; the only thing possible is to initiate local acts of resistance."[68]

It is hard not to become frustrated by the inadequacy of this kind of answer to the omnipotent, ubiquitous evil that Ophir describes. And it is difficult not to rebel against the underlying assumption that every order—social, political, economic—should be seen as a hothouse for the production of evil. Ophir appears unwilling to imagine a system that does not function primarily as a "pattern of the production of evils," and he seems to prefer undermining all establishments over any kind of activity within their framework. He allows no room for the possibility that the "social order" which he reviles may at times be far more effective at thwarting these evils; it is inconceivable to him that the long-standing presence of many of these systems—government, police and military forces, criminal justice systems

and institutions of education and welfare—may owe to their success as a bulwark against the horrific evils that reign whenever the public order totally collapses. Ophir pays little heed to the lessons of history, which teach that even when such systems are deeply flawed, they are usually preferable to the violence, corruption, poverty, and starvation that rage in their absence.

Presented in such a sweeping fashion, and lacking any expression of idealism or a desire to reform the world, Ophir's particular brand of anarchism offers only the darkest of visions. He clings to a slim hope, "some chance, something greater than zero," of reducing pain, exploitation, and oppression—while arousing the reader's deepest suspicion that his method may only make matters worse.

## V

In the final analysis, the failure of Adi Ophir's moral theory is to be found in its opening assumptions. Not only does Ophir accept at face value many of the axioms that have led moral philosophy to its current predicament, but he also takes them to an extreme. Following Kant, he argues that the moral imperative must be determined without regard for man's natural inclinations. Following Levinas, he identifies morality with absolute devotion to the other, a self-abnegation that obligates us at all times to overcome all egoistic considerations. But Levinas, at least, draws a distinction between "ethics," which is concerned with the articulation of absolute principles, and "morality," which must take into account the limitations of social and political conditions and interests that are not ethical. Without morality and its compromises, Levinas asserted, ethics would always run into trouble at the point where theory meets reality.

Ophir, on the other hand, has no interest in such compromises. His own distinction between ethics and morality is instructive. Ophir maintains that whereas "ethics" is concerned with the self, in determining what are the qualities of correct, restrained, and polite behavior, the interest of a "moral" theory is in "measureless devotion to the other." Ophir's altruistic moral system knows no bounds—which is precisely why it is of no use outside the theoretical sphere. Moral philosophy is based, to no small degree, on the careful measurement of the distance between principles and interests: When it is too small, hypocrisy is liable to take the place of conscience; when it is too great, the link between moral philosophy and reality is lost. The gap between the principles laid out in *Speaking Evil* and the world in which they are meant to work is vast and unfathomable: While the moral standards that it sets are impossibly high, the reality it depicts is unbearably debased. Ophir seeks to find in the phenomenon of evil the fulcrum for his moral theory, but in his attempt to make the latter objective and tangible—what he argues is missing from the concepts of good and justice in other moral philosophies—he sinks so deep into its substance that he cannot extricate himself. Despite Ophir's assertion of the lack of any "radical" difference between what is and what should be, it would be difficult to imagine a work that does more to widen that gap than *Speaking Evil*.

Ophir enlists "practical wisdom" to bridge the chasm between an intolerable reality and an impossible morality. But even as he erects this bridge, he methodically dismantles it. Thus is revealed the clash between Adi Ophir the humanist, who believes in the power of the intellect to serve as a guide in a Godless world, and Adi Ophir the postmodernist, who denies man's ability to adopt an objective and comprehensive perspective regarding the world in which he lives. The thread of argument that is advanced in *Speaking Evil* is constantly woven and unraveled between these two poles.

But many of these problems are not unique to Adi Ophir or to his particular moral philosophy, even if they reach exceptional proportions in

his work. On the contrary, what *Speaking Evil* ultimately offers, despite the author's intentions, is a vivid illustration of the problems currently plaguing all of moral philosophy. Unwilling to accept Sartre's dictum that "there are no signposts to guide us in this world," Ophir has built for us another empty doctrine, testimony to the weakness of an entire discipline.

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## *Notes*

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Brooklyn: Haskel House, 1977), pp. 35-36.

2. Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 36.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: MacMillan, 1969), p. 57.

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (Paris: Angel, 1970), p. 47. [French]

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), pp. 17-59.

6. The outstanding examples in this context are Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire and Alasdair MacIntyre. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988); Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1983).

7. Adi Ophir, *Speaking Evil: Towards an Ontology of Morals* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Am Oved and Van Leer, 2000), p. i. [Hebrew]

8. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. vii.

9. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 11.

10. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 280.

11. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 290.

12. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 290.

13. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971).

14. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. iv.

15. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 337.

16. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 212.

17. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 1.

18. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas* (New York: Collier, 1913), p. 74.

19. Ophir emphasizes that his analysis, as opposed to classical phenomenology, does not seek the primary structures of experience, and is incorporated in a structural analysis of the societal and cultural conditions of the very existence of experience.

20. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 12.

21. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, pp. 211, 267.

22. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. i.

23. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 276.

24. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 212.

25. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 279.

26. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 291.

27. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 289.

28. Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 209.

29. Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 213.

30. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985).

31. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. iv.

32. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. v.

33. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, pp. iv-v.

34. Ze'ev Levi, *Other and Responsibility* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997). [Hebrew]

35. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1990), p. 293.

36. According to Levinas, the objective dimension enters interpersonal relationships only upon the appearance of the "third," who disturbs the intimate connection between the subject and the "other." This is the transitional point between the ethical sphere and the political, in which the egalitarian demands of "objective" social justice take the place of the asymmetrical responsibility between the subject and the other. See Levi, *Other and Responsibility*, p. 93.

37. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. v.

38. Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), p. 133.

39. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 323.

40. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 236.

41. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 70.

42. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Differend," *Theory and Criticism* 8, 1996, p. 141. [Hebrew]

43. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 232.

44. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 237.

45. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 273.

46. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987).

47. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 320.

48. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 212.

49. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 230.

50. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 316.

51. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 317.

52. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 389.

53. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 390.

54. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 390.

55. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 277.

56. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 371.

57. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 352.

58. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 355.

59. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 276.

60. Quoted in Max Silverman, *Facing Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 14.

61. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 354.

62. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 398.

63. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 317.

64. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, pp. 397-398.

65. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 271.

66. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 319.

67. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 329.

68. Ophir, *Speaking Evil*, p. 398.