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“Evil: The sight that cannot be seen; the speaking that cannot said”

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Dan Bloom. JD, LCSW, New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and private practice, New York, New York, USA

Abstract: This paper is a revised text from my contribution to a panel “The Aesthetic of the Emerging Other: beauty, responsibility and evil at the contact-boundary.”. My fellow panelists were Sally Denham-Vaughan and Gianni Francesetti. This paper is a personal reflection on evil, responsibility, ethics, and the other from a gestalt therapy perspective. I consider the phenomenon of overwhelm of the contact-boundary and questions of responsibility and non-indifference raised by this phenomenon.

Keywords: evil, beauty, ethics, responsibility, the other

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann darüber muss man schweigen.

[Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.]

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922), p. 162, 90, 1922

What radical evil really is I don't know, but it has ...somehow to do with the phenomenon of making human beings as human beings superfluous... [it is an organized attempt [to] eradicate the concept of the human being.

Hannah Arendt in *Radical Evil*, R. Bernstein, 2002

1.0 Introduction: A boy hears wailing

I was very, very young when I heard them wailing behind the closed doors of the synagogue as my father led me home. Soft sounds and loud sounds at the same time scared me. I don't remember if I asked him what was happening, but I know I saw his face and his lips were tight and his eyes were watering and I knew something was wrong and my recollection is that somehow he communicated to me that what was going on was something I shouldn't know about. Couldn't know about -- that there were no words for him to say or words for me to hear. I was frightened. He took my hand. His grasp was gentle, soft, and warm. We walked home. Then my memory ends

It was years later – not so long ago, actually – that I realized that those people I heard as a child were relatives of European Jews on the High Holy days in the safety of post-war America who were mourning their slaughtered families. I was hearing the sounding of grief so fresh, lamentations so raw that their cries that stood outside of time itself, suspended in an extended moment, one extended now as if floating above a clicking tock of time.

It was unspeakable evil for which my father could find no words for his boy's ears to hear. It was an evil whose horror sucked air from the lungs of any words. No words could be said about the meat-grinder maceration and incineration of human beings, those named and known, loved and cherished. My father could find no words to tell me what was happening behind those doors, not because he was inarticulate, but because human speaking fails in the face of this evil.

Evil for which there are no words. It is that for which there are no words and we must remain silent. Yet we *must* open our mouths and force ourselves to make sounds because human beings are beings who sense, who feel, who think – and speak. We cannot surrender to paralysis.

Being silent is not an option. Fail as we inevitably must, our inadequate words must burst forth from our mouths. It is our responsibility. It was said that even Wittgenstein broke his own logical maxim as he continued to develop his philosophy.

If evil is that for which there are no words, it is imperative that we find other ways articulate it.

I will consider this.

I will not address evil as the opposite of good or as sinning, being bad, or some Satanic act and so on. These are matters of morality and theology that are the domain of laws and religions. I might even call them everyday, mundane, or factual concerns – and this “evil,” everyday evil. Ordinary. It is “evil” as a word we use casually and colloquially. At the same time I am not saying these are unimportant or wrong ways to consider the topic. There is a long philosophical tradition of seriously considering evil that I won't discuss. What follows are reflections from a different direction. I am not propounding a philosophy. My reflections are meditations. We might consider this my way speaking to that little boy. And his father.

2.0 Radical Evil

Some thoughts from contemporary philosophers, though, will point me toward my central concerns.

In *Evil in Modern Philosophy* (2002), Susan Nieman suggested two events that challenged us to re-think – or think—evil. The first was the devastating Lisbon earthquake in 1755. The Enlightenment struggled to make sense of so much senseless human loss presumably at the hands of God. Think Leibnitz's theistic “best of all possible worlds” and then Voltaire's satire of it in *Candide*. Nieman says the second event was the Holocaust, the Shoah. How could human beings bring such hell to earth and upon one another?

Hannah Arendt was more specific when she said that after what is known in Europe and America as World War I, we were left with the ethical question, “How was it possible that human beings could cause so much destruction?” After World War II and the Holocaust, we

were confronted by, “How was it possible that human beings could cause so much human annihilation?” World War I tore the ethical fabric of Europe. After World War II and the Holocaust in particular, there was no fabric left to tear, nothing but an abyss looking down into which caused existential delirium.

There is the difference between the evil that led to the casualties of war, however “monstrous,” and the evil that one writer could refer to creating a “a hole in the heart of the world.” (Kaufmann, J. (1998)

This is the evil that Hannah Arendt called “radical evil,” -- an evil that attempts to annihilate the very essence of humanness. (R. Bernstein, 19xx) It is the evil bequeathed to us by the last century as an ethical torment for us to suffer. These are evil, I suggest as the manifestations of what is unsayable. This is not an evil that calls us to battle it. This isn’t an evil that can be defeated, although its perpetrators may. This kind of evil is even trivialized by the name, “evil.” It is a human force that by the radical extremity of its consequences provokes an experience that challenges us to explore a radical ethics of responsibility. Gestalt therapy offers us means to enter this world.

3.0 *The contact-boundary and its overwhelm*

3.1 *The sublime and beauty*

The contact-boundary is the phenomenal location where the aesthetic qualities of contact reveal structures that can and do support a radical ethics of responsibility. (Bloom, 2013) Among other things, the contact-boundary is the vulnerable membrane of our human soul. There are experiences that as if overwhelm the contact-boundary, each with different consequences. (Gecele) They are experiences of excess. For example, there is the excess of manic experiences, there is the excess of beauty (Francesetti ,) and the excess in experience of evil -- horror. For purposes of this discussion, I want to contrast our experience of the beautiful with our experience of evil. I will propose the one is assimilable in a kind of restorative contact, enriching and extending the boundaries of our humanness. The other is an overwhelm that as if stops us in our tracks, “halts” or “suspends” the contacting process. The overwhelm past, we are turned back upon ourselves and toward the other --- upon the *effects* of evil itself. Evil and its horror point us to the suffering other.

On their way to developing aesthetics, the philosophy of beauty, Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) and Friedrich W Schelling (1812 – 1854) described experiences of transcendent awe, which they called the “sublime.” For Kant, it was extreme of natural beauty; in Schelling it was the transfiguring beauty of classical tragedy. The sublime is an experience that overcomes all reason and unseats all sensibility. Yet this awesome and sublime experience is *restorative*. To Schelling the sublime cleanses the soul. Beauty as a sublime experience is an excess that restores. It is a stepping outside of ordinary experience, an *ek-stasis*, in order to return altered by the experience itself.

This is an experience of an overwhelm of the contact-boundary. In basic gestalt therapy theory, in full to post contact, figure/ and ground seem to flow together -- touch touching touched. (Perls et al. p. 402) This is the momentary event of contact; a need is met, a goal achieved. Then the sequence continues. In the experience of excess as absorption in beauty, the contact-boundary, as the horizon of time and space and the domain of emergent figure/ground, is overwhelmed. The transcendence of contacting with its intentionality for contact is now without

coordinates. When this overwhelm passes, this experience is folded into the temporal flow of self process. Contacting beauty is neither of the organism nor the environment but an adjustment of the whole world of experience to the self. (Perls et al., 1951 401). The overwhelm of beauty by its very nature is temporary. That it flees from our sight no matter how firmly we try to hold it in our gaze nearly defines it. (Perls et al, 1951) Touching and touched by beauty, we desire more. The fullness of such contacting remains as ripe as a fruit whose fragrance draws us forward to further contacting. Further figure/grounds proceed carrying the impressions of this richer world, as a melody lingers in the air after the music stops. It easy to be enraptured by this experience of excess. We return from this experience some degree enriched. Something is added. Our world is enchanted.

We become pleurably, transcendently, and recuperatively lost in beauty – without losing our confidence that we will return fuller, richer, and extended. Our experience of beauty expands the horizon of who we are. We assimilate this experience in an uninterrupted self process; a new figure emerges, brighter, clearer, and more resilient. Paul Goodman, gestalt therapy’s informal poet laureate, wrote,

In a difficult and conflicted field, where almost nothing can exist without deliberateness and caution and effort, beauty is suddenly a symbol of Paradise where all is spontaneous – “beasts without fangs, and without thorn the rose”; yes, or beasts with fangs, and heroes who can win or lose and where, as Kant said happiness is the reward of good intentions. (Perls et al. 401)

We can understand how the English poet John Keats could have been persuaded that “Beauty is truth, and truth, beauty.”

Perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche is clearer sighted, and can contextualize Goodman, darkly, -

It is unworthy of a philosopher to say: the good and the beautiful are one; if he goes on to add, "also the true," one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly: we possess art lest we perish of the truth.

Nietzsche, F. (1888)

3.2 *Evil*

Beauty is excess that is contactable. This is materially, dramatically, tragically, different from the experience of evil. Evil is an actuality whose *horror* can be felt but whose actuality not contacted, not assimilated. Its *effects*, present and sensed, of which we are aware and conscious, can be contacted. Like, infinity itself, evil eludes our grasp. It is a gaping hole that swallows whoever looks into it.

Beauty has an aesthetic. It is sensed and is perhaps even sensibility raised exponentially. Evil, radical evil, is an excess that is quite the opposite. A sight that cannot be seen. Unseen, ungraspable, it is beyond our sensible faculties. Yet its actuality is unmistakable. There can be an elegance to the rising smoke from a crematorium or grace in the tumbling of fresh corpses into a pit. Mass murderers’ techniques may have good form. We can shiver when we contemplate

atrocities. We can indeed be awed and find “beauty” in the acts of sadist¹. These are contactful reactions to what is visible in the sight that can’t be seen. That is, we recognize the parts that make the whole, and then formal qualities of the formed gestalt itself, but the evil, its horror-filled potentiality is beyond human sight. To find beauty in the surface of the unspeakable is easy until the unspeakable cries out to speak.

In “Elements of a phenomenology of evil and forgiveness,”(2006 Gerit Glass writes that

[s]omething exists in the nature of evil itself that resists being spoken about and thought about.. ...[I]t is a dynamical category: *something occurs during the process of experiencing and telling and analyzing that manifests itself in malfunction of one’s very capacity to experience, in inability to verbalize, and in the ineffectiveness of the systems with which we categorize our moral world.*
Glass pp172 -203 *emphasis added*

Emmanuel Levinas (1906 - 1995) was the French phenomenologist whose post-Holocaust ethical phenomenology changed the way ethics, self, and the other are understood. His ideas help show how evil as unassimilable excess or overwhelm at the contact-boundary can point us to the suffering other and to responsibility. I will return to his latter point in a few moments. Flat out, Levinas says that evil is excess *per se*. It overwhelms. To Levinas, “evil is not only non-integratable, it is also “the non-integratability of the non-integratable.” (Levinas, E, 1987, p. 180) The malignant sublime. It eludes total comprehension, defies categorization. In our gestalt therapy terms in which contacting necessarily includes identification and assimilation, evil on these terms eludes contacting. It eludes because it overwhelms. It is the overwhelm with no return. Unlike the restorative overwhelm of beauty, the overwhelm of evil “nihilates.” It extinguishes being. It deracinates life and leaves nothing in its place.

Primo Levi bore witness to his imprisonment in Auschwitz. His memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (1959) is harrowing. In one chapter, he describes how he and others have been led off the box cars through the cold and snow to a room. They had already been brutalized and seen the unspeakable horrors/They had been transformed from human selves to indistinguishable things. They are in,

A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen. What can one think about? *One cannot think anymore, it is like being already dead.* ... Levi, p 28 (*emphasis added*)

Every phrase in Levi’s record of the horror of Auschwitz the unsayable with it, as the unconveyable and in-experienceable mark of evil that his pen tried to make speak. As I read it, to me at least, it was clear how each word, phrase, and sentence fell short of carrying-forth the meanings intended as he wrote. Yet he sketched a place where thought cannot take place. This is the locus of evil and a contact-boundary at overwhelm. The experience of evil is excess. “Nothing happens and nothing continues to happen.” Time is annihilated with a temporality. Life

¹ We can take pleasure in fear or horror, such as at horror movies – when we feel safe from the possibilities of evil.

is death. There an experience without experience. An empty room. Speechlessness. There is a hole in experience. Nothing happens We become things. Our personhood is annihilated. The excess in beauty restores personhood; the excess in evil nihilates, makes into nothing.

4.0 Responsibility and response-ability: non-indifference

A sight unseeable, a scream beyond hearing, we are moved by Levi's experience. We are at the very edge of evil. But as the contact-boundary itself is overwhelmed by excess, evil as excess transcends sensibility – that is, of our capacity to make sense of our senses. We turn away from that which we cannot see and *toward* those suffering the effects of this evil. We experience our own experience of the effects of evil in ourselves –and in the suffering other. In this experience at *this* contact-boundary, we and this other are as if gathered in the figure of suffering. The experience of our contacting the suffering other is not an experience that overwhelms the contact-boundary, but is one of sadness grief, harmony, care, and responsibility.

As we contact the figure of suffering at the contact-boundary, in the extreme terms of Levinas, we are taken hold of by the intensity of the other's devastation. We are "persecuted." Taken hostage. We are imprisoned by an ethical call: we are summoned to responsibility (Lévinas, 1996, Orange, 2011) that comes from a place "otherwise than being" (1981). This reveals the deepest ethical structure of the contact-boundary and self emergence. In these circumstances, the situated ethics of gestalt therapy is disclosed. This is the moral compass of our deepest background that neither tells us right from wrong, but that there is a right and a wrong, even a good and an evil. (Bloom, 2013)

Since a multitude of known, unknown, and not-yet-known others are woven into the social fabric given to experience, what the phenomenologists call the life-world, -- the ground of contacting itself -- we are as if born into bodies with ears attuned to the cries of the other.(Bloom, 2017). We are implicitly response – able. This response-ability is not chosen by us but given to us. It is an aspect of the givenness of the human situation. This is an ethical responsiveness at the root of human contacting. And this responsibility sharpens in our experience of the suffering other – clarified, exponentially raised, and brought into focus by our experience of the consequences of evil. Like radical evil, then, it is a radical ethics. But how we act within the givens of that radical ethics is a different matter. This ethics does not direct an action. But one thing is certain. This response-ability marks us with an incapacity to be non-indifferent to human suffering, no matter our response to it. That is a matter of right and wrong. Morality. We may gasp or flinch – and turn away. We may become anesthetized in an instant. But non-indifference is the given that we cannot help but sense from the very heart of our sensibilities that there is an other who is suffering. Non-indifference is the basis for our noticing the effects of evil – we cannot be indifferent to the horror it causes. And it is this -- our ineradicable sense of the other's suffering, indeed of the other as other -- that radical evil aims to annihilate.

5.0 Conclusion

More often than not, in my reading of history, we face our non-indifference and turn away from the suffering other. More often than not, we transform other human beings into objects and things. Can there be hope under these circumstances"? The irruption of radical evil of the Holocaust was not unique. Mechanized death tore through most of Europe. Think of the

“killing fields” of Cambodia and the pyramid of skull. Think of the genocides in Rwanda and Myanmar. Radical evil continues, obeying no boundaries of space or time.

Hope? There is hope – depending on where you look for it.

I end by turning to that boy and his father. The father had no words to say to his boy. Yet he was flooded by the suffering of those in that synagogue, wailing for their dead. He felt the slight hand of his child in his and in tenderness, he took care to try to protect his son from the horror of evil unsayable. We find hope in their clasped hands. Of course, it is an uncertain hope – and a fragile one. But it is a hope founded on care and utmost response–abilty in the sight of that cannot be seen.

Thank you.

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Biography

Dan Bloom JD, LCSW (www.danbloomnyc.com) is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City. He studied with Laura Perls, Isadore From and Richard Kitzler. Dan teaches at the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and is adjunct faculty at gestalt therapy institutes around the world. Dan lectures and present workshops at international conferences and gestalt therapy residencies. He leads webinars in the theory/practice of contemporary gestalt therapy. He is past president and Fellow of New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and past president of the AAGT. He is also a member of member of EAGT. Dan’s writings are widely published. He is an associate editor of *the Gestalt Review*, book review editor of *Quaderni di Gestalt* and a member of the Scientific Board of the *Gestalt therapy Book Series* published by FrancoAngeli. He co-edited the book *Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now* and *The NYIGT in the 21st Century*.

