

Theo L. Hettema

Spirituality and the Problem of Evil: the Challenge of the Philosophy of Jean Nabert

verschenen in: Hendrik M. Vroom, *Wrestling with God and with Evil. Philosophical Reflections* (Currents of Encounter 31; Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007).

Introduction: Two preliminary questions

Jean Nabert's oeuvre testifies how a philosopher from the Western, Christian tradition deals with the problem of evil in a spiritual way. I think we have to take seriously his treatment of evil for our reflection, and the exposition of Nabert's philosophy in this article is meant to feed the reflection on evil. However, before turning to Nabert's philosophy, I want to treat two preliminary questions that arise in speaking of spirituality and the problem of evil. First, can we conceive evil as a problem for reflection, both in philosophy and theology? And second: why should we bother with spirituality? It is only after the detour of these questions, that it becomes fruitful to consider some thoughts and intentions of Nabert.

Is evil really a systematic problem?

The first question might seem somewhat embarrassing: can we conceive evil as a problem for reflection, both in philosophy and theology? For why should evil *not* be a problem for thinking? There is so much evil that destroys human life and that threatens the fundamentals of human existence, that we can only call evil a huge problem. Yet, there is also much that can be brought forward against the idea of evil as a problem. I notice at least three points why evil should *not* be a problem.

First, it must be noted that it is difficult to conceive evil as an independent theme in actual religious experience. The Buddhist religion is a well-known example of a religion that does not recognize evil as a substantive entity. Evil *is* not. It should be perceived as a veil that comes forth from ignorance. We may add monotheistic religions to Buddhism. We can, for example, observe large parts in the Bible, where any conception of evil as an independent force is missing. A well-known example is given in 2 Samuel 24, where the Israelite God incites king David to organize a census, as a means to review the strength of his army. Subsequently, the same God punishes David and his people with pestilence, because the numbering of the people is an act of pride. The cruelty of this divine punishment goes so far that David himself must choose out of three options what punishment he wants for his people. In a second version of the story, presented in 1 Chronicles 21, it is Satan who incites David to

his numbering the people. But even when this act is attributed to a wicked angel like Satan, it is God himself who finally sends the punishment of the pestilence. In this situation, David exclaims: 'Let me fall now into the hand of the LORD; for very great are his mercies: but let me not fall into the hand of man' (1 Chron. 21, 13). I cannot conceive of a better example of the fact how a conceptualization of evil, in the person of Satan, is simply not the main topic for monotheistic religion. The primary existential and religious question here is how to remain true in obedience to a god.

There is a second aspect in which evil is not a problem, namely on the level of reflection. It belongs to the methodology of religious studies to have a detached attitude. We observe religious acts and feelings, and we may be moved by them, but they should not direct the acts of the researcher in religious studies. For example, as a researcher in religious studies I can describe the phenomenon of wearing a blue amulet against the evil eye, but I cannot deliver a plea for the effectivity of the amulets. When I do so, I cross the border between observation and religious conviction (which is different from religious participation for the sake of observation). The communication of my research is then not a matter of academic accountability, but a matter of religious propaganda. As a researcher in religious studies I may experience evil personally, but this does not govern my description: I describe the phenomenon, but I do not deal with the problem. The character of evil as a problem has been put in brackets, methodologically.

The same methodological considerations apply to the field of systematic philosophy and theology, the third aspect that I touch upon. We may say that, for systematic reflection, it is a problem to conceive evil, rather than that evil is a problem. Systematic reflection raises all kinds of questions. We may perceive evil phenomena, but is there a singular concept of evil behind those phenomena? What is the status of such a concept? Is it a kind of linguistic common understanding, is it justified to attach a status of being to it? Can we say that evil *is*? And what are our grounds to criticize something that is? I would say that there are, roughly, three systematic perspectives to deal with evil.

First I distinguish the metaphysical approach. Evil is a fact of life, is the starting point of the metaphysical approach. The pressing question for the metaphysical approach is, what the status of the word 'is' implies in this proposition. The metaphysical approach meets all kinds of difficulties. Western modernity has become suspicious against metaphysics. The assumption of the existence of something beyond the actual phenomena is treated with a large distrust. Philosophy of religion struggles with the interpretation of evil as a force and as reality (Heering 1974). It is a real obstruction for metaphysical thinking that the identity of

evil is defined as a category opposed to good. Evil does not display an independent status. The consequence of this approach has been elaborated by Karl Barth with his characterization of evil as 'das Nichtige' (nothingness) (Barth 1950, § 50). Any supposed entity of evil simply melts away because of the pervasive affirmation of God's revelation, in this interpretation. Of course there is also a philosophical movement in which evil gets a positive meaning, that is, a meaning not dependent upon another category, but this approach meets the same problems of any metaphysic. Perhaps we should say that metaphysics is simply too static for a complex phenomenon like evil. This is also the position in which we can find Jean Nabert. As a philosopher in the Cartesian tradition, he is persuaded of the fact, that the reality of being does not let itself approach directly, and that a strictly metaphysical approach cannot be maintained.

There is an alternative approach, which I call the axiological approach. The question for this approach is, how values are attached to the field of acting. It is in this field that we can find the interest of Nabert, who has written on acting and ethics. In an axiological view, evil is interpreted as a value that is attached to situations, acts, or utterances. Evil is not an entity, but it is an adjective that we label to certain objects and nouns. For a large part, the axiological approach has an ethical dimension. It is concerned with judging what is good or bad. However, we should not neglect the linguistic aspect. Judging something as evil is a linguistic act of attributing an adjective to a noun. For a part, the axiological approach meets the same problem as the metaphysical approach: it considers evil as a category opposite to good. As such, it makes evil a derivative category. Moreover, viewing evil as part of the act of judgment leads us to the problem of judging in general. How should a judgement be placed between judge and object to be judged? Is 'evil in the eye of the beholder', as beauty is said to be by some, or is our judgement governed by the object or situation in view? As a matter of judgment evil is secondary to the problem of judging.

I sketched evil as a 'fact of life'. This designation perhaps comes most close to the third approach of evil, the anthropological approach. Anthropology, as the question to the meaning of human being, is the field into which the philosophy of Nabert necessarily must run, as a consequence of a non-metaphysical, axiological approach. What has an anthropological approach to do with evil? Whether or not evil is a fact of life, at may be at least called a fact of human life, something that is experienced as a fact in human existence. However, what do we actually say, when we assert this? We run the risk of transforming evil into a designation of a general situation of human being. We should speak of a human condition of fallibility. Yet, we may learn from Ricoeur that such a general situation of

fallibility is only part of the total picture of evil (Ricoeur 1965 and 1967). And what grounds do we have to make general assertions on the nature of humans? An anthropological approach runs the serious risk of being too rough to sketch the complexity of evil in human life.

All these three approaches run the risk of foreclosure: the presentation of a method that ranges evil under a certain category beforehand. However, then evil is not a problem for thinking. It becomes a mere phenomenon, or it just displays our problem with thinking evil. It seems as if systematic thinking in philosophy and theology lacks a good armamentarium for reflecting the problem of evil. The methodological danger of foreclosure is the most imminent threat to a full reflection of the problem of evil.

Evil and spirituality

There is a field of reflection in which I sense possibilities to counter the threat of reflective foreclosure: spirituality. This leads us to our second preliminary question: Why should we bother with spirituality? Is it in spiritual reflection that we can speak of evil as a ‘challenge to philosophy and theology’? This is at least how Paul Ricoeur, an admirer of Nabert, approaches evil (Ricoeur 1985). What is for Ricoeur the challenge of evil to philosophy and theology? For Ricoeur, this challenge is given in creating continuously new ways of thinking evil, when former ways run down in paradoxes. The challenge of thinking evil is, in other words, not to concede to any foreclosure in thinking and acting. One should develop an unremitting searching for thinking, acting, and feeling with regard to evil. Such thinking, acting, and feeling cannot combat evil. Speaking of the political and ethical struggle against evil, Ricoeur’s final word is that in such struggle ‘the enigma of real violence will be revealed’ (Ricoeur 1985, 648). The end of reflecting evil is to reveal its character of an enigma.

I connect to Ricoeur with this aim. At the end of his article, he wants to develop the genre of wisdom as the culmination of thinking, acting, and feeling the enigma of evil, a culmination that Ricoeur describes, with Freud, as a work of mourning: ‘What I should like to do is to consider Wisdom, with its philosophical and theological prolongations, as a spiritual help in this work of mourning, aimed at a qualitative change in the lament and the complaint’ (Ricoeur 1985, 646). The words ‘spiritual help’, and especially the word ‘spiritual’ strike my mind. The French edition of the text even more freely speaks of ‘spiritualisation’, where the English text uses the term ‘catharsis of the lament’ (Ricoeur 1994, 231).

I cannot expand upon the meaning of the word spiritual and spirituality at this place (cf. Hettema 2001). It is sufficient to point at the meaning of the word as a certain insight into

something that has value for the whole of someone's living. Moreover, it is important to notice that spirituality has to do with the *development* of an essential insight. Spirituality always expresses a certain feeling of growth, of advancement of knowledge. An essential image for spirituality is the image of the way, the road that a traveller treads on, leading to distant aims. Now, my thesis is that a spiritual mode of reflection should meet the exigency of thinking evil without the danger of foreclosure. This thesis may raise one's eyebrows, for it seems to counter the common meaning of spirituality. In much spirituality, individual consciousness is part of a larger, cosmic whole. However, the insight into this has to be conquered over against an alienated way of living. Conformity, or even resignation, is the key term in this spiritual experience of evil. Evil is not what matters. It only appears as a deficient mode of insight. Now, given such common meaning of spirituality, how can one attach to spirituality the task of thinking the unremitting enigma of evil?

Indeed, our conception of spirituality should be corrected. As for myself, I have met such a correction of the notion of spirituality in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989). Taylor focuses upon fundamental terms that govern the whole of living and acting in modern culture. He goes as far as to state that there is an 'inescapable framework' of modernity (Taylor 1989, 3). There are some basic ideas of what the good life implies, which govern modern experience. The notion of articulation is dear to Taylor. Actual life consists in an articulation of basic convictions that are given as the framework of a culture. Now it is typical for modernity that it has an 'ethics of inarticularity' (Taylor 1989, 53). The malaise of modernity is not given in some accidental consequences and aberrations. It consists in an unremitting disregard of its own moral sources, its basic convictions and 'hypergoods'.

We can speak of moral goods and hypergoods for acting, but such notions are not appropriate for other fields of experience. Even the metamoral term of 'strong evaluations' that Taylor developed in earlier publications, is too much connected to the moral field of deliberate choice, while it is Taylor's explicit intention to 'consider a gamut of views a bit broader than what is normally described as the "moral"' (4). Now we notice that Taylor uses the word spirituality for the values that 'make our lives meaningful or fulfilling' and which cannot be classed as moral values. In short, spirituality has to do with 'what makes life worth living' (4). Spirituality concerns the depth level of cultural convictions, for Taylor. As such, it is different from a belief in God. A spiritual dimension of life can even be clearly articulated in modern life without assuming the existence of God (310). In this interpretation, Western secularization does not imply a loss of spirituality, but rather a spiritual orientation upon other sources (313). Therefore, reflection upon modern culture and spirituality go together, for

Taylor. One can even state that, in his philosophy, the reflection upon modernity is ultimately a matter of spirituality. It is for this reason that the conclusion of his book runs into a discussion of the ‘spiritual possibilities in today’s culture’ (490).

As in our general description of spirituality, we meet a conception of spirituality that has to do with a growing insight, overcoming a sense of alienation. However, this sense of spirituality does not aim at resignation beforehand. It lines up with the task of thinking in Western modernity and does not counter the rational possibilities of modernity. For Taylor the spiritual task of philosophy is the task of searching increasingly deeper into the basic convictions of a culture. This is the kind of search that meets the exigencies of reflecting evil.

Jean Nabert’s project of spirituality

There is another consequence laid down in Taylor’s conception of philosophy: it is directed towards a certain culture. Reflection does not take place in a void. It has a cultural context. Such a context is not an impediment to the intellectual task, but creates its possibilities. I cannot do otherwise than place myself in the context of Western modernity, as Taylor does. From this context, I arrive at the task of thinking evil without foreclosure, aiming at the sources of Western modernity. Now I cannot expand on what Western modernity means, or where it starts in history. I only bring forward one major characteristic, which is given in a split between human consciousness and the world. The effort that Descartes has had to make to bring together *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is paradigmatic for the way Western modernity has torn apart consciousness and the reality of a world outside consciousness. The spiritual task for Western modernity is to bridge that gap.

I will not pretend to have the capacity to fulfil that task myself. I turn to the philosophy of Jean Nabert, in order to explore a mode of thinking that meets our demands, especially because he has fathomed the need to bridge the gap of the Cartesian approach in his reflection. Jean Nabert has been a French philosopher in the transcendental tradition, living in the first half of the twentieth century. He did not pursue a standard academic career, but in between his activities as teacher and librarian he developed a fine oeuvre and a small circle of devoted readers. His attention goes to the boundaries of consciousness. Thus, he published a dissertation on the experience of liberty within a transcendental conception of the self, a monograph on *Elements for an Ethic* (Nabert [1943] 1969), and a fine *Essay on Evil* (Nabert [1955] 2001). After his death appeared a reconstruction of his draft of a monograph on *Longing for God* (Nabert 1966). His work is extremely dense and hard to read. Yet, it exhibits

an attraction that binds the reader. His work fascinates me for some years, because I encounter in his thinking exactly the struggle between consciousness and world.

The realization of the human self through self-reflection is a real struggle for Nabert. He does not choose the Kantian conception of a formal, transcendental self. His notion of the human self starts at a reality that is full of feelings, notably the feelings of fault, failure, and solitude. Nabert's task is a reflective philosophy, but it is a reflection that, from the start has to deal with a self that is hindered in its self-realization. Reflection on the self is not a distanced activity. It is a necessary step of human being in ordering his confused feelings that ask for understanding. Reflection is an utterance for a desire for understanding, even more: a desire to be. This brings Nabert's *Elements for an Ethic* near to Spinoza's conception of a *conatus essendi*. For Nabert, ethics implies the narrative 'history of desire constitutive of our being' (Nabert 1969, 4). The human self displays a history of becoming a full human being. Initial, confused feelings of fault, failure, and solitude lead to a reflective insight into an fundamental affirmation, an insight of *I am*. This affirmation does not fill the desire to be, for this fundamental certitude asks for perpetuation and realization in human existence. This is the point where human values come in that form human being in his actions in a world with other people. The human narrative of self-reflection ends in a feeling, but not the confused initial feeling of fault, failure, and solitude. It is a feeling without distanciation; it is a feeling that expresses the presence of the certitude of existential affirmation. It is a feeling that expresses an enjoyment of being. For such enjoyment, reflective philosophy does not offer the tools. Nabert changes his description to another range of words, speaking of veneration and of spiritual forms and virtues (Nabert 1969, chap. 10-11). At the end of the reflective movement of the self, we enter a range of absoluteness. That is not an absoluteness with a transcendent dimension. It means an absolute transparency of human action upon the roots of human being. This direction towards the absolute deserves the word spirituality.

So, for Nabert spirituality forms the culmination of a long reflective story of the human self. It presents a kind of bliss, given in absolute certitude of what being is about. The spiritual is an expression of the aim of the long story of the human spirit. The experience of evil is taken along in this reflective movement. Nabert does not present evil as a secondary factor, after describing an ideal of human consciousness. No, evil is present from the start, and, even more, it is present not as an external factor but as a part of human action, given in the mix of feelings that govern human being: fault, failure, and solitude. The realization of the human desire to be does not mean the elimination of evil. The spiritualization of the human self only implies that the experience of evil does not stand in between the human self and his

certitude to gain an affirmation of being. Thus, his reflective philosophy expresses a certain hope of being, without falling back upon a sense of vitalism or mere optimism that can only be maintained by neglecting the fact of evil. This forms for me the enduring merit of his philosophy. It is remarkable that such a balanced view of the human struggle for full transparent existence, expressing a willingness to offer one's life for another, and expressing a certitude that such a transparent, spiritual life is possible, has arisen in France, in the midst of the Second World War. It testifies a belief in living for the absolute that I only know from Simone Weil.

Yet, it seems as if Nabert was not fully satisfied with his conception of ethical life. He offers a fundamental revision of his view in his 1955 essay on evil (cf. Doucy 2000). Already in his *Elements for an Ethic*, Nabert had written that 'an ethic can only offer itself as the structure of a concrete history which each self begins again and which it does not always complete' (Nabert 1969, 117). In this view, the impediment to an absolute, spiritual life seems to be laid down in a limitation of the capacities of the human self.

In his *Essay on Evil*, evil is presented as a hindering force that comes from outside. Evil is not given in extraordinary disasters, but in the daily confrontations with chance and mischance (Nabert 2001, 41). The experiences of evil undermine the integrity of the inner self, and seem to block deepening into a spiritual insight. Nabert now does every effort to express the meaning of evil as a real hindrance to the human self. His starting point is, that evil is unjustifiable. The task of reflective philosophy and of human existence is to think the unjustifiability of evil until the end. This has the severe consequence for Nabert that he even refuses to call evil absurd. We may notice the rise of existentialism in this respect. Evil is not a mystery, as well. It is unjustifiable for human reflection and action. The remainder of Nabert's essay consists in an analysis of the ways in which the human mind searches for ways either to soothe the unjustifiability of evil or to formulate any kind of response. Nabert does not simply turn to the optimism of a spiritual or religious gain of existential certitude, nor does he sink in a pessimism that no attitude towards evil is possible. There is, in his words, a permanent oscillation in human consciousness, in which the possibility of spiritual gain is kept open (Nabert 2001, 176). His *Elements for an Ethic* displayed the human self in his desire for being. In the *Essay on Evil* this desire is replaced for a desire for justification. Any suggestion of a straightforward regeneration of the self has been left now. And even the desire for justification is deconstructed both as a duty and as an illusion. What remains is the task of thinking evil, as a permanent task for all philosophy.

It would ask another paper to show how Nabert refuses the help of religious answers to evil, but, nevertheless, extends his desire for justification to a desire for God, a desire which is fed by testimonies of the divine (Nabert 1966). I only mention this desire, as to show that thinking evil does not come to a rest, but awakens a new movement in thinking. It is this continuous movement in thinking, sensitive to the transcendent, that makes his philosophy a spiritual philosophy.

Evaluation

What is the value of Nabert's thinking? In my opinion, Nabert fulfils a major task in Western thinking. The task of modernity is to explore the borders of human consciousness, as it is situated in a world of living. Our experience of evil is given 'within the boundaries of mere reason', but is not confined to inner experience. Nabert offers a mode of thinking that refuses any internalisation nor externalisation of the experience of evil. His approach to evil leads to ethics, to a continuous task for existence, and to spiritualization. This spiritualization does not lead to any form of soothing, but rather radicalizes the initial desire of being that starts reflection. Instead of any metaphysical, axiological, or anthropological foreclosure, arises an infinite movement of desire, without leading to resignation, but rather to a purification of hope. Rather than speaking of evil as a challenge, as Ricoeur does, I would use the word task, as to express a more moderate, but intense way of thinking.

Nabert expresses this reflection as an itinerary of thought (cf. Naulin 1963), which leads to a spiritual turning to the absolute or the divine. I would be inclined to use this designation 'spiritual' for the entire movement of reflection, and not only the final part of it. In this sense I deviate from Nabert, while remaining true to his positing philosophy as a task over against evil.

This task is more than a philosophical task. I found a good example of this in a review of the 2004 movie *Hotel Rwanda*, which tells the moving story of a hotel manager in Rwanda during the genocide in the nineties. More than 1200 people are saved because of his interventions. The reviewer is impressed by the movie, yet he has a difficulty with the pathetic Hollywood approach of the story, and with its hopeful moral message that there will always be people who stand up against evil. At the end of the review, the critic writes:

'It is significant that the scene that awakens the imagination of the public is the most horrible. We see nighttime views of Paul [the hero hotel manager, TLH] in a jeep, which, once it gets off the road, starts to rock as if it rides a rough terrain. A few moments later, we know that he has driven over hundreds of dead bodies, which are

dumped there. Everything has been said and shown, at that moment, but the movie must go on, because the makers want to end it with a sense of hope. But why? Why do we have to go out of the movie theatre with an optimistic feeling, after a movie about genocide?’ (JvdB, 2005).

I think this movie critic has captured some of the intention of Nabert. I tend to agree with him. If there is any hope over against evil, it is not given in any optimism about the moral capacities of human beings. Such a hope may only appear in a rigid purification of our coping with evil. *Hotel Rwanda* does not teach us how evil may be conquered. Yet, the movie does not lead to pessimism, either. It expresses the conviction of the worth of individual intervention. Yet, such intervention does not take away the tragedy that passes in Rwanda.

The critic’s unease with such simple feelings as optimism or pessimism, reaches the heart of Nabert’s intentions. For Nabert, when both optimism and pessimism are transcended, the possibilities arise to lay bare the character of evil as something unjustifiable (Nabert 2001, 178-179). An attitude that transcends optimism and pessimism may show us how evil can be laid bare and thus, in a sense, dismantled. The need for such an attitude arises time and again. Evil is an ongoing challenge for a spiritual philosophy and theology.

Bibliography

Barth, Karl (1950). *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3. Zürich.

Doucy, Emmanuel (2000). ‘La pensée du mal chez Jean Nabert’. *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 84. Pp. 439-474.

Heering, H.J. (1974). *Over het boze als macht en als werkelijkheid*. Meppel.

Hettema, Theo L. (2001). Tussen theologische rede en belijdenis. *Philosophia perennis en de conditie van filosofische spiritualiteit*. In: H.J. Adriaanse (ed.), *Tweestromenland. Over wijsgerige en belijdende theologie*. (Leuven. Pp. 147-177.

JvdB (2005). ‘De manipulerende hand’, *Het Parool*, March 16.

Nabert, Jean (2001). *Essai sur le mal*. Paris. (originally 1955).

Nabert, Jean (1966). *Le désir de Dieu*. Paris.

Nabert, Jean (1969). *Elements for an Ethic*, transl. William J. Petrek Evanston Ill.

Naulin, Paul (1963). *L’itinéraire de la conscience. Étude de la philosophie de Jean Nabert*. Paris.

Ricoeur, Paul (1965). *Fallible Man*. Chicago.

Ricoeur, Paul (1967). *The Symbolism of Evil*. New York.

Ricoeur, Paul (1985). 'Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology'. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53. Pp. 635-648.

Ricoeur, Paul (1994). Le mal: un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie'. In: Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie*. Paris. Pp. 211-233.

Taylor, Charles (1985). *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge.

Taylor, Charles (1989). *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. New York.