

THE OUTRAGE OF MEANING: SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE IN PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSES TO MORAL ATROCITY

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Recently a number of contemporary philosophers have suggested that the erosion of the 'power of articulation' of religious traditions has left a gap in the ethical language of predominantly secular, individualistic, market-dominated modern societies. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has stated that 'Secular languages which simply eliminate what was once intended leave behind feelings of discomfort. As sin was transformed into guilt, and the transgression of divine commands into the breaking of human laws, something was lost.' (Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*) Perhaps one of the areas in which this loss is most keenly felt is in the quest for a commensurate response to human evil, and in particular to mass violations of humanity. Yet religious language, despite its expressive potential, also runs a risk: that of bestowing an illusion of meaning on events which demand to be confronted in their meaningless horror. The very hint that senseless suffering might not be an ultimate aspect of reality can come to be experienced as ethically intolerable.

The lecture will explore the tensions which arise at the interface between philosophical and religious discourse, in attempts to deal with this ambivalence of meaning in the response to atrocity. Is it possible to develop an ethical vision that preserves the resonance of religious language, without evoking a transcendent dimension or ultimate purpose, in ways which could be regarded as mocking the victims? And, if this cannot be done, are we able to find a secular ethical language capable of saying all we need it to say? This issues will be explored through a consideration of the discussion between Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Jonas, which arose from issues explored in the latter's writings, including his famous essay, 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz', along with the more recent debate over evil between Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo.

Peter Dews read English at Queen's College Cambridge, and then took an MA in the sociology of literature at Essex, going on to gain a PhD in philosophy at Southampton University. Before coming to Essex, he taught at Middlesex University and Anglia Polytechnic University. He is author of *Logics of Disintegration* (on post-structuralism and Critical Theory) and of a collection of essays, *The Limits of Disenchantment*; he has also edited *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, and *Deconstructive Subjectivities* (with Simon Critchley). He has been a Humboldt Fellow at the University of Tübingen, and has held visiting positions at the University of Konstanz in Germany, at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, at the Graduate Faculty, New School University, and Columbia University in New York, and in the Center for the Humanities, Grinnell College.

Main interests: the history of German Idealism and romanticism; the Frankfurt School and contemporary Critical Theory; 20th-century European philosophy; philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Current research: the problem of evil after Kant; models of intersubjectivity in modern European philosophy.

Selected Publications:

- 'Post-modernism: Pathologies of Modern Society from Nietzsche to the Post-Structuralists', in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy, eds, *The*

Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Political Thought (Cambridge: CUP, 2003)

- 'Imagination and the Symbolic: Castoriadis and Lacan', *Constellations*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2002.
- 'Law, Solidarity, and the Tasks of Philosophy', in R. von Schomberg and K. Baynes, eds, *Discourse and Democracy: Essays on Habermas's Between Facts and Norms* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).
- 'Die Entsublimierung der Vernunft als Habermas' Leitgedanke', in Stefan Müller-Doohm, ed., *Das Interesse der Vernunft: Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit "Erkenntnis und Interesse"* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002).
- 'Kritische und konservative Paradigmen der Psychoanalyse', in Werner Bohleber and Sybille Drews, eds, *Die Gegenwart der Psychoanalyse—Die Psychoanalyse der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2001), pp. 225-237.
- 'Naturalismus und Anti-Naturalismus bei Habermas', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* (vol. 49, no 6, 2001), pp. 861-71.
- 'Radical Finitude and the Problem of Evil: Critical Comments on Wellmer's Reading of Jonas', in Maria Pia Lara (ed.), *Rethinking Evil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 46-52.
- 'A Question of Grounding: Reconstruction and Strict Reflection in Habermas and Apel', in Peter-Uwe Hohendahl and Jaimey Fisher, eds, *The Actuality of Critical Theory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), pp. 205-226.
- "The eclipse of coincidence: Lacan, Merleau-Ponty and Schelling", *Angelaki* 4:3 (2000), pp. 15-23
- 'Law, solidarity and the tasks of philosophy,' *Theoria*, 88 (December 1996)
- *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy* (London, Verso, 1995)
- "Althusser, structuralism and the French epistemological tradition" in Gregory Elliott (ed.) *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994) pp. 104-41
- 'Foucault and the French Tradition of Historical Epistemology', *History of European Ideas*, No1.14, No. 3
- 'The Crisis of Oedipal Identity: Between Lacan and the Frankfurt School', in Harry Kunneman and Hent de Vries (eds), *Enlightenments: Encounters between Critical Theory and Contemporary French Thought*, Kok Pharos, 1993
- 'Faktizität, Geltung und Öffentlichkeit', in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1993
- 'Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian Dialects', *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, Nos. 21/22, 1992
- 'Die Wahrheit des Subjekts: Sprache und Intersubjektivität bei Lacan', in Bernhard Tuarek (ed), *Psychoanalyse und Philosophie: Lacan in der Diskussion*, Fischer Verlag, 1991 [Peter](#)