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# The Nazi-card-card

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## Introduction

It should be made clear from the start that we all in fact *already* know the Nazi-card-card very well. At some point most of us have witnessed, or even been part of, a discussion that got just a little out of hand. In such situations it is not uncommon for one party to begin to draw up parallels between Germany in 1933 and his counterpart. Once this happens the counterpart will immediately play the Nazi-card-card and say something like, “Playing the Nazi-card are we? I never thought you would stoop that low. That is guaranteed to bring a quick end to any serious debate.” And just like that, the debate will in effect be over. It should be plain to anyone that it is just not *right* to make a Nazi of one’s opponent. The Nazi-card-card always wins.

This tells us that it is in general unwise to play the Nazi-card, as it is bound to be immediately countered by the Nazi-card-card, but the lesson, I think, goes beyond mere rhetoric. Indeed, I believe that something quite profound and important goes on in situations like this, something which goes in a different direction to the perhaps more widely recognized Godwin’s Law, which could be formulated as follows: “As a discussion in an Internet forum grows longer, the probability of someone playing the Nazi-card approaches 1.” The more interesting law, I think, would be that

of the Nazi-card-card, which in similar language states: “The probability of someone playing the Nazi-card-card immediately after the Nazi-card has been played is always close to 1.”

In the present work I seek to investigate and understand this curious second card. It is a rhetorical move which is as naturalized as anything, but which is rarely discussed. And does not the true power naturalization show itself best where something does *not* become the object of discussion? We will quite often be confronted with debates on the Nazi-card. But seldom do we encounter debates on the Nazi-card-card. Thus I wager that a genuine philosophical investigation into the nature of these arguments is severely lacking. It is this lack that I seek to fill in this article.

It is interesting to note that what has often been cited as the original definition of the Nazi-card in fact amounted to the effective playing of the Nazi-card-card. I am thinking here of Leo Strauss, who specified the fallacy of the ‘reductio ad Hitlerum’ in 1953: “It does not go without saying that in our examination we must avoid the fallacy that in the last decades has frequently been used as a substitute for the reductio ad absurdum: the reductio ad Hitlerum. A view is not refuted by the fact that it happens to have been shared by Hitler” (Strauss 1965, pp. 42-43). It should be clear that defining the Nazi-card as a fallacy amounts to playing the Nazi-card-card.

Since the Nazi-card-card has been with us from the very beginning of the use of the Nazi-card, it would seem that the horizon of every attempt to play the Nazi-card is already the Nazi-card-card. This simple observation should not be taken lightly. Where our ideological landscape becomes saturated by the Nazi-card-card in this way, it does not matter how grotesquely racist or authoritarian the rhetoric (or indeed the policies) of political agents become, it will never be legitimate to set them on a par with Nazism. In the end this does not have much to do with the properties of the political agent in question, but rather with the signifier ‘Nazism’. To speak in Kantian terms, Nazism has become the signifier of not merely radical but demonic evil. This identification in turn quite often serves to legitimate the rhetoric and policies defended by the mentioned political agents. Precisely because no one could ever be legitimately called a Nazi, the space for legitimately being a racist seems to be infinitely expandable.

## **Demonic evil**

In order to begin making sense of this structure of fetishist disavowal, we should perhaps begin with a consideration of what Kant sought to convey with his notion of diabolical or demonic evil. So what is it? For Kant it was precisely characterized by not existing. As he puts it, we never conduct

pure evil in the manner of a rebel (Kant AA VI, p. 36). Demonic evil is what we have only at the point where the will is exclusively concerned with doing evil; it is evil done for the sake of evil alone. Kant famously argued for the impossibility of this kind of evil. No matter how hard someone should try to do pure demonic evil in this sense, he will in the end fail, if for no other reason than because he could be said to believe that it is a good thing to do pure evil.

The point is that Kant's notion of the pathological will is an obstacle to *any* form of purely principled action. For the purely principled good action the pathological will is an obstacle, because I can never be sure that there is not some fundamentally selfish maxim at work behind my seemingly principled action. And for the purely principled evil action, the pathological will is an obstacle *for the very same reason*: namely because I can never be sure that there is not some fundamental selfish maxim at work behind my seemingly principled action.

This would seem to contradict off the bat the idea that there can be demonic evil. For Kant evil means to fail to act out of the principle of the moral law, by succumbing to the law of self-love (Kant AA VI, pp. 34-5). Thus, for instance, if I am helping someone in need, which could very well be a case of my following the moral law, that deed is only good in so far as the ultimate cause of my action is the moral law itself. If I, for instance, would not have done it if it did not also make me feel good about myself, regardless of whether I would admit it or not, the deed should in fact be regarded as evil. Evil consists primordially in having some hidden selfish maxim directing one's actions. In other words, the idea is that all evil is founded on the pathological will, which again goes to say that there can be no pure, principled, or, as it were, demonic evil.

Several authors have argued that this means that, in the Kantian view, there is simply too much evil around. Should we not praise the acts of helping others as good, regardless of whether they are enacted from pure principles? Does the Kantian position not end up in some form of inhuman demand both with regard to the 'perpetrator' and the 'victim'? Would it not be the case that any one of us would gladly accept the help we need, when we are in need, regardless of the true moral psychology of the one who is helping us? And does it not seem unfair to condemn someone as evil, simply because he likes doing good (see, e.g., Bernstein 2002)?

To questions such as these, I believe we must answer that the better version of Kant is the inhumane one. Even though it is possible to find a more humane Kant, by careful selection of the texts one is investigating (e.g., as Hannah Arendt does by making the judgements of the beautiful and the notion of the *sensus communis* from the *Critique of Judgement* the focal point of her

version of a Kantian political philosophy (see Arendt 1982)), we should, I think, take great care not to read Kant in a humanizing way.

In arguing for an inhuman reading of Kant, I am not looking to legitimize the flagrant use of the concept of (demonic) evil in political discourse. Here, the best example is still found in discussions on terrorism, where one encounters the ambivalent combination of fear and wonder epitomized in the question, “why do they hate us so?” This is a question which is not really meant to produce an answer, but rather simply to underline the incomprehensibility of the deeds one is confronted with. From the positing of such incomprehensibility the road to the stipulations “they are simply evil” or “they are evil because they are evil” is a short one. This, precisely, is not the point here. The point is rather the opposite. It is in the humanizing perspective that demonic evil is needed as a kind of radical other, which can be the site of the inhuman. As Alain Badiou has convincingly argued, what presents itself as humanism, for instance in the musings about the necessity of respecting differences, very often ends up in the position where the only differences that can be respected are the differences that make no difference.

A first suspicion arises when we consider that the proclaimed apostles of ethics and of the ‘right to difference’ are clearly horrified by any vigorously sustained difference. Because for them, African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, and the Chinese are totalitarian, and so on. In truth the celebrated ‘other’ is acceptable only if he is a good other – which is to say what, exactly, if not the same as us? (Badiou 2002, p. 24)

What Badiou points out is the sad fact that the humanizing perspective is generally only good at giving us a warm feeling inside. In terms of actually adding to our knowledge or contributing anything worthwhile to ethics, the notion of respect for otherness is generally useless. Respect for otherness works well, as long as the other resembles us, and the moment the difference becomes too great, that is the moment the humanizing perspective has recourse to the notion of (demonic) evil.

A thoroughly inhuman reading of Kant’s notion of evil should instead endorse the view that human beings have a tendency towards evil in the sense of radical evil. Evil is first of all a problem we should have with our own actions. It is precisely not something to be found and marvelled at in the (wholly) other. In short, if radical evil is the propensity for evil which is rooted in all human beings including ourselves, and demonic evil is the form of sublime satanic greatness we perceive in the (wholly) other, then it is radical evil which is the more interesting concept.

From this, the parallel between how Kant understands demonic evil and the way the concept of Nazism functions in our contemporary ideological environment (which we are here reading through the notion of the Nazi-card-card) should be clear. The last thing we should do, according to Kant, once we have established the distinction between demonic and radical evil, is to say in some way that radical evil is less of a problem because at the very least it is not demonic. On the contrary, the notion of demonic evil is precisely in Kant's view a phantasy, an empty construct.

The problem with the Nazi-card-card is that, precisely because it works to immediately rebuke the Nazi-card, it serves to produce an understanding of Nazism, which is completely on a par with the Kantian notion of the (phantasmatic) demonic evil. The result is that any political evil can be made to look inconsequential, because it always pales in comparison with the demonic force of Nazi evil. But it also has the added effect of a strange kind of historical revisionism.

The ideology of the Nazi-card-card only works if we can believe that there never was an action that truly was tainted with real Nazism. When things begin to resemble the demonic, we find it increasingly difficult to believe in their reality. Not necessarily in the sense that we would consciously deny believing in them; belief should here be taken in the strict Žižekian sense. Believing lies on the side of doing rather than knowing in the classic Marxist formula of ideology: "They do not know it but they do it." In so many words, it does not matter much if we would not consciously state the belief that there never was a Nazi (we generally would not); in our normal discursive activity under the heading of the Nazi-card-card, we act as if we in fact believed it.

The Nazi-card-card can in this way be said to retroactively exculpate anyone involved with the Nazi regime. Precisely because Nazism through the ideological work of the Nazi-card-card becomes a demonic spectre, we could be said to find it increasingly difficult to imagine that any real person actually supported the regime. Was it in fact not the exact same logic 'unfortunate Nazis' such as Martin Heidegger used to defend their membership of the party? Boiled down to the essentials, that defence consisted in saying, "It may be that I was a 'Nazi' (i.e., a member of the NSDAP), but I most certainly was not a Nazi (i.e., guilty of the Holocaust or other demonic evils). In reality I was an internal critic." Just like no one could today be justifiably called a Nazi in our current ideological environment, so too, apparently, there were no real 'Nazis' in Germany in the years from 1933-45. In hindsight, everyone was an internal critic.

Indeed, everyone in a sense *had* to be. As Arendt puts it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "True, if the Adenauer administration had been too sensitive about employing officials with a compromising

Nazi past, there might have been no administration at all. For the truth is, of course, the exact opposite of Dr. Adenauer's assertion that only 'a relatively small percentage' of Germans had been Nazis, and that 'a great majority [had been] happy to help their Jewish fellow-citizens when they could'" (Arendt 1963, p. 15).

The first lesson we should take from the considerations of the Nazi-card-card is thus that we should endorse fully the important lesson of Hannah Arendt's philosophical work. We should always resist the temptation to identify in evil the sort of transcendent demonic force which in the end only serves to turn it into an aestheticized object. Evil is not something we should be fascinated by and marvel at. Evil should always be understood in its banality.

### **Good and evil**

So far we have identified a particularly puzzling part of our current ideological landscape: the Nazi-card-card which on the one hand serves to legitimize just about any non-Nazi evil, and on the other hand serves to enact a strange form of exculpation of actual Nazis. In conjunction with this we have pointed out a crucial point of Kantian moral philosophy that goes to say that there can be no demonic evil, because all evil is in some way linked to self-love. Taken in this way the Kantian ethical programme could perhaps serve as a healthy antidote to the ideology of the Nazi-card-card. By reminding us that evil is fundamentally radical rather than demonic, Kant could perhaps help us dispel the magic of this fetishist disavowal. The Kantian/Arendtian argument would go: What is so troubling about Nazism is not that it stands as some kind of demonic evil; it is rather that the most extreme horrors and political catastrophes are possible in spite of the fact that they in a sense are nothing out of the ordinary. It is the banality of evil that is troubling.

At this point I believe it may be fruitful to raise a challenge to the Kantian philosophy of evil, not only because it raises an important challenge to Kant, but also because it can, I believe, further our understanding of the ideological function of the Nazi-card-card.

As has been recently argued by philosophers such as Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek, Kant's unwillingness to accept the possibility of demonic evil could perhaps be said to have been too rash. The point is not that we should reserve for ourselves the right to view the *other* as demonic – thereby positing him as a wholly incomprehensible and inhumane creature – but rather that the outright dismissal that *I myself* could in fact nurture a kind of diabolical will might be too hasty. In terms of the present discussion of the critique of ideology, this point is particularly interesting,

because a careful consideration of it can help us gain a better view of the emotional investment that goes into the Nazi-card-card.

Before we go on to modify Kant in this way, we should make clear the basics of what Kant argues about the “ground of evil” in *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (Kant AA VI, pp. 34-5). Here he maintains that the difference between good and evil does not consist in following different principles as such, nor does it consist in the difference between sensibility and reason. Rather, the difference between good and evil consists in how one chooses to put the *relation* between the moral law and the law of self-love, because as a human being one can never be without some influence of either of those. The idea is that good follows from holding the moral law in higher esteem than the law of self-love, whereas the opposite holds in the case of evil. If one in one’s action makes the moral law the condition of the law of self-love, one is doing good, if one on the other hand makes the law of self-love the condition of the moral law, one is doing evil.

With this in mind we are capable of appreciating the point Žižek and Zupančič make about the problems inherent in dismissing outright the notion of demonic evil. Žižek provides a striking example: Don Giovanni. As he is confronted with the choice of either repenting or suffering the consequences (which literally means going to hell), Don Giovanni chooses to persist in his libertine (self-loving/evil) ways. In other words, he sticks with evil on principle, even when just a little bit of good (namely repenting or, as it were, apologizing to the ones he had harmed) would be very much in line with the law of self-love. The point is that this act of Don Giovanni, while with regard to content it is an act of evil, still looks very much like a truly ethical deed, precisely because it consists in acting out of principle rather than self-love. And what is equally important is that, as anyone who has seen the opera will know, there is a kind of perverse heroism to this insistence upon not repenting. That heroism cannot be dismissed quite as easily as the demonic evil the Nazi-card-card posits about Nazism, because we can identify with Don Giovanni.

It is important here to clarify the difference between this notion of doing evil on principle and the notion that we discussed above with regard to the Nazi-card-card. What the Nazi-card-card does is to establish the demonic evil of Nazism as something wholly ‘other.’ It bestows upon it an almost transcendent flavour, because of the immediate way in which we respond to the injustice of the Nazi-card. It was in this precise sense that Arendt warned against seeing in Nazism some form of evil greatness – after she had been warned by Karl Jaspers in response to her earlier work on totalitarianism that “a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of

‘greatness’ – of satanic greatness – which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the ‘demonic’ element and so on” (quoted Bernstein 2002, p. 215).

Here, on the other hand, with Mozart’s Don Giovanni, we precisely do have a kind of ‘greatness in evil’. There is not only something one could wonder and marvel at, but also in a certain way something to admire. There is something with which one can identify with in Don Giovanni, whereas the ‘satanic greatness’ of Nazism is precisely the name for that which is wholly other.

That being said, we are ready to take one step further into the intricate psychology that is central to Kant’s ethical thought. The crucial idea we must grasp in order to see the significance of Don Giovanni is that acting selfishly (i.e., in one’s action making the law of self-love superior to the law of morality) in fact can take very different shapes. I can act selfishly simply because I like it, i.e., out of selfishness. But I can also act selfishly because I make it a principle to act in that way.

When Don Giovanni refuses to repent, he undertakes an act that puts the difference between these two to the point. He has made it a genuine principle to live as a libertine, which simply means that he has made it a principle to act out of self-love. And now he is confronted with a most exclusive either/or<sup>1</sup>: *either* he will live up to his principle of being selfish, *or* he will simply follow the law of self-love, which in this case is equal to the law of self-preservation. The *principle* of acting selfishly – or, as it were, living the life of a libertine – puts him in direct confrontation with *being* selfish. What he does is to insist in choosing *the principle* of self-love over self-love *itself*. The point is that there is no contradiction entailed in the idea that I can act out of the principle of acting selfishly, without actually acting selfishly, because the principle itself, in a strange way, can bring me beyond self-love.

Curiously enough, the contradiction does not emerge until I try to act out of the principle of acting selfishly, and simply act selfishly. If Don Giovanni should have succumbed to the situation and repented, i.e., if he had sought to follow the principle of acting out of self-love, but had lost his nerve and provided an insincere apology in order to save his skin, then he would in fact have given up on his principle of living the life of a libertine in order to succumb to the law of self-love which he, being a libertine, had made it a principle to live by.

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<sup>1</sup> No wonder Søren Kierkegaard was attracted to the opera and discussed it in great detail in *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard 1991, II p. 47ff.).



It is of course this tension between acting on the principle of self-love and simply acting out of self-love which makes the case of Don Giovanni so compelling. It is precisely this tension which at the same time makes him look like an ethical hero, in so far as he is capable of setting his own particular self-interests aside in order to live his life in accordance with a principle, *and* like a diabolically evil person, in so far as he precisely is doing evil out of principle.

It should be pointed out that the paradoxical formulations, i.e., acting out of the principle of self-love by not acting out of self-love, will not be easily accepted by everyone as conclusive. However, if someone should seek to counter them by saying that they do not make sense and that the only way to live up to the principle of acting out of self-love would be to actually act out of self-love, if someone should argue that the true libertine would in fact be the one who skips the principle and delivers an insincere apology to save his skin in order to later go on following his libertine ways, then they would be cheating. Such a move would precisely not capture the significance of the story, because what it does is simply change it. If Don Giovanni had 'lived up' to his principle of living the life of a libertine, by saving his skin, the story would fundamentally change. Rather than placing him somewhere in the paradoxical in-between (an ethical hero and a demonic evil), he would simply be made to be a weasel. He would immediately be made to be a spineless type of person. Now the point of the story is that he precisely is not. In so far as we can in some weird way identify with the paradoxical nature of the story, simply changing it will not help. And the lure of the story of Don Giovanni, so I claim, is that we can in fact identify with his choice.

This by itself poses the problem for Kant's ethical thinking, because it shows us that this form of 'demonic evil,' in the sense of doing evil out of principle, is in fact not completely inconceivable, even if it leads to some rather paradoxical formulations about what is actually going on. But what is even more troubling is then the point that because of the way principled good and evil are interwoven, Kant's unwillingness to consider principled evil reflects back on his notion of principled good. If it is truly impossible to imagine that one could act in the way of Don Giovanni or some similar character, is it then not also impossible to imagine someone fully setting aside the law of self-love for the sake of some principle of doing good? It is at this point that Alenka Zupančič has argued that we should fully endorse the link and accept that there is a kind of uncertainty with regard to truly principled ethical acts (Zupančič 2001, pp. 105-6).

What Kantian ethics does, and does well, according to Zupančič, is that it places duty above the good. In a Kantian line of thought we precisely cannot say beforehand what the good is, and then afterwards that it is our duty to do it. Rather, at the highest point of ethics there is only duty; good

and evil are secondary notions. The point Zupančič makes with this assertion is in a way a radicalization of what we saw to be the pathological perspective above, i.e., making the law of self-love the condition of the law of morality. She argues with Kant that it is indeed not only the immediately obvious candidates that should be called pathological here. It is not simply the life of the libertine indulging in self-love that is pathological. Rather it is any given notion of the good, which is entertained in advance, that should be understood to be pathological in the strict sense of the term. If I 'already know' before I act that I will be doing good, e.g., if I know that helping others is good, if I know that giving money to charity is good, and I then act with regard to this knowledge, then my act will be (radically) evil, precisely because all such 'goods' that can be known in advance are pathological.<sup>2</sup>

Zupančič takes up an example produced by Henry Allison and gives it a twist to illustrate the point. Allison asks us to imagine that we knew a secret about someone, and that it would be very hurtful to him if he was to hear it. The point he makes is that if we reveal the secret, and argue that we did it because it was our duty, then we are in fact hiding behind our duty. Zupančič now argues that there are two self-deceptions at stake in the example. The first is the one Allison highlights, namely that we are hiding behind our duty in the sense we have a pathological motive for our living up to it; we do not simply tell him the secret because of our duty to speak the truth, but also because we wish to hurt the man. In addition to this, Zupančič points out: "But this self-deception is made possible only on the basis of another, more fundamental moment of self-deception. It is possible only in so far as we take (the 'content' of) our duty to be 'ready-made,' pre-existing our involvement in the situation" (Zupančič 2000, p. 59). If, on the other hand, we must take responsibility for our duty, i.e., if it is only through the very enactment of our duty that it becomes our duty, then there is no way out; it ceases to be the kind of shield which we can set up between ourselves and our actions.

Therefore, unless we subscribe to some pathological notion of the good, we cannot know beforehand whether the act we do will turn out to be good or evil. One can of course subscribe to some form of everyday morality – meaning here, vaguely, the general rules or customs that a community adheres to, and more specifically any notion of morality where the good can be known

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<sup>2</sup> Even certain very popular ways of interpreting the categorical imperative should be considered pathological in this regard. Crucially, the idea that it should be understood as a certain kind of test, which I can run through before my act, to see if it is ethically defensible or not, is exactly a case of missing the central thrust of Kant's (quite inhumane) demand. Christine Korsgaard provides a good example of a reading of Kant that takes the categorical imperative to be a test (see, e.g., Korsgaard 1996, pp. 99-100; Korsgaard 1999, p. 12).

in advance of the act that enacts it – and say off the bat that what Don Giovanni does is simply evil, or at the very least unkind. That, however, would precisely be a way of taking away the crucial Kantian point. In so many words: everyday morality can only serve to make truly principled acts impossible – regardless of whether they are for the sake of good or bad. True ethical acts on the other hand are characterized by the fact that they ‘will have been good.’

This is a point which both Žižek and Zupančič have taken great care to confirm. Given that everyday morality has this adversity to the truly principled act, because it can look as much like an act of Don Giovanni (or worse) as an act of Mother Theresa, then it follows that *any* truly principled act and hence any genuinely good act will look like a transgression, a disturbance of the peace or simply as evil from the viewpoint of everyday morality. To the social formation in which it takes place, the genuine good will tend to look like demonic evil. It is only after the fact of the act that it may turn out that the act indeed was good.

It is in this sense that we should follow Kant in the assertion that duty comes before the good. Our duty is not to be good, it is not to act in a way that can be known in advance to be good, regardless of whether this good is understood in the sense of consequences or principles. Instead, our duty is simply to act in accordance with duty. The good is only ever what follows from doing one’s duty, not the other way around. Zupančič puts this to the point by arguing that the categorical imperative is a “half-law” (Zupančič 2000, p. 163). It is something “half-said, which in order to become a law, has to be supplemented with an actual act of the subject” (ibid.). In this sense it is only after the fact of the act that we can know whether it was good or not.

The structure of the Nazi-card-card fits this ideology of ‘everyday morality’ perfectly here. If to everyday morality all genuine ethical acts are bound to look like demonic evil, then the Nazi-card-card is that formation of everyday morality which guarantees the ultimate horizons of all such acts. It teaches us a way of thinking about the acts that go to the limit in this sense: they are at one and the same time demonic and impossible, unreal. But the problem of evil is precisely not that it is incomprehensible and unreal. It is rather the banality of evil that is the problem.

### **Pleasure and enjoyment**

The lure of the view presented by Žižek and Zupančič should be obvious from the discussion we have been following. If not through anything else, then at the very least through the history of Nazism, we should by now have learned that the simple adherence to everyday morality or some other notion of a preconceived good does not guarantee that we can avoid the most catastrophic

political evils. The banality of evil in the Nazi regime was such that genocide could become an accepted part of everyday morality.

Eichmann can again serve as an exemplary case. Arendt notes how at one point during the trial, he spoke of a directive that was meant to ensure that the people who were being sent to the death camps did not experience unnecessary hardships on their way there.

Eichmann, asked by the police examiner if the directive to avoid 'unnecessary hardships' was not a bit ironic, in view of the fact that the destination of these people was certain death anyhow, did not even understand the question, so firmly was it still anchored in his mind that the unforgivable sin was not to kill people but to cause unnecessary pain. During the trial, he showed unmistakable signs of sincere outrage when witnesses told of cruelties and atrocities committed by S.S. men [...] and it was not the accusation of having sent millions of people to their death that ever caused him real agitation but only the accusation (dismissed by the court) of one witness that he had once beaten a Jewish boy to death. (Arendt 1963, p. 96)

Does this not express the perfect compatibility of the most heinous acts and what is often celebrated as common decency? It was as if Eichmann was apologizing to the Jewish people. "I may be taking you to your deaths by the millions, but at the very least I am making sure that you are not inconvenienced greatly on your way there, so can we please be polite about it."

The crucial question we should ask in continuation of the Kantian thought of philosophers such as Žižek and Zupančič is that since common morality, or the positive law for that matter, did not serve to prevent the catastrophe of the Holocaust, why should we put faith in it with regard to our contemporary political and ethical predicaments? Indeed, it would often seem that everyday morality and other preconceived notions of the good are what makes it bearable for us to live with the atrocities that we are a part of, much sooner than it is what makes us able to prevent them.

As Thomas Pogge has forcefully argued, we are in fact living in a situation where a political catastrophe of immense proportions is taking place before our very own eyes, and doing so in a way that is very much in tune with everyday morality. In 2000 he wrote:

Retrospectives on the twentieth century give ample space to its horrors. Natural catastrophes are overshadowed by wars and other human made disasters: six million murdered in the German Holocaust, thirty million starved to death in Mao's Great Leap Forward, eleven million wiped out by Josef Stalin, two million killed by the Khmer Rouge, half a million hacked to death in Rwanda, and so on. Missing from these retrospectives are the deaths from starvation and preventable diseases—world hunger for short—some two hundred million in just the few years since the end of the cold war. Why are these deaths not mentioned? Are they too humdrum, too ordinary, not

shocking enough? Or are they perhaps too disturbing—deaths that, unlike the others, are not clearly someone else’s responsibility? (Pogge, 2000)

A few lines below, Pogge describes the natural reaction to this problem from the viewpoint of everyday morality. “Do we bear some responsibility for deaths due to extreme poverty abroad? Confronted with this question, most respond with a firm *No*” (Pogge 2000, see also Pogge 2002; Pogge 2005).

It should be clear that this ‘no’ is identical to the playing of the Nazi-card-card. The very comparison of the deaths resulting from Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, etc., to the deaths resulting from current global inequality (not to mention the capitalist system that produces it) is of course just another way of playing the Nazi-card. Hence the outright and immediate denial that the comparison should at all be worthy of consideration amounts to the Nazi-card-card: “Of course they do not compare! And of course we are not to blame!” For sure, one can produce plenty of exculpating arguments, for instance that we personally can do nothing to stop the catastrophe, or that we are mere cogs in the great machinery of capitalism. But would such arguments not be eerily similar to the arguments produced by Eichmann at his trial? He too was merely a cog in the machinery, he was only following orders.

But we should probably not stop there. Is it not the case that the contrary answer, a firm “Yes”, is equally part of our everyday morality in the form of humanitarian organizations, relief programmes, and so on? And is it not the case that it has amounted to little more than the firm “No”, in terms of actually preventing the catastrophe? Are we not all in some way or other internal critics to the system of capitalism?

What philosophers such as Žižek and Zupančič offer is a different notion of ethics, which sets us free from the wavering back and forth between these two poles. Here genuine ethical acts are of the kind that may have been viewed as evil before they are undertaken, but which through their very enactment retroactively restructure the socio-ethical environment in which they take place. Ethical acts are creative in the sense that they invent a new understanding of the issues at hand; they precisely ‘will have been good.’

Still, there is a problem – some would say a danger – which surfaces once one begins to follow the path where the good cannot be known in advance. Indeed, there is a very likely suspicion that some form of revolutionary romanticism lies at the end of this path – with all the well-known

dangers inherent therein.<sup>3</sup> The question is, in other words, if the ethical point of view advanced by Zupančič and Žižek and others has as its consequence that we should just go along with any kind of act that is in transgression of common decency and everyday morality, in the hope that something genuinely good might come out of it? Fortunately, neither Žižek nor Zupančič nor anyone else who accepts the points I have been making above should feel forced to engage in this kind of hysterical revolutionary romanticism. The mere fact that genuinely good acts can look like diabolically evil ones from the viewpoint of everyday morality does not mean that any transgression is better than none.

In order to avoid this fateful consequence, we should take one step further into the field of moral psychology and investigate what it means to submit oneself to a demand. The reason for this move should be obvious. Just as the knowledge of the good in advance of the act that enacts it is bound to result in some kind of pathological incentive, so too is the knowledge that nothing of what is held to be good in everyday morality can serve as a legitimate ground of action. In other words, revolutionary romanticism is called romanticism for a reason. It too installs a hidden pathological motive: as soon as I know in advance that everyday morality is wrong, I am destined to in some way enjoy the transgression of it.

I introduce the Lacanian concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*) here for specific reasons. The battleground on which these issues are to be settled is precisely that of enjoyment. To put the point succinctly, it is the very imposition of a law in virtue of some notion of a preconceived good (regardless of whether it originates in reason, sensibility, God, the Führer, the vulnerability of others, the celebration of transgression, etc.) that makes it possible for us to *enjoy* being subjected to this law.

To make clear the consequences of this claim, we should take care to spell out the precise meaning of the notion of enjoyment. Most importantly it should be understood in sharp contrast to the notion of pleasure. Where the pleasure principle for Freud and subsequent psycho-analytic theory governs our more or less utilitarian interactions – we seek to enhance pleasure and diminish pain (Freud 1940, p. 3) – what lies beyond the pleasure principle is precisely the libidinal investments, drives and so on, which do not conform to the rule that we seek pleasure and avoid pain. It is here that we encounter what Lacan understood as enjoyment. Enjoyment is the kind of surplus-pleasure one can gain from pleasure and pain alike. It is the sucking of an aching tooth,

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<sup>3</sup> To put the point succinctly, we are here in danger of making ourselves vulnerable to the Gulag-card.

which certainly does not make the tooth hurt any less (quite the opposite in fact), but which nevertheless soothes, comforts or arouses in a way that makes it almost impossible to stop.

A detailed way of unfolding the concepts of pleasure and enjoyment takes us to the figure of Don Giovanni once again. Don Giovanni's choice to face eternal damnation, rather than repenting his sins, does not conform to the pleasure principle – this much should be clear. In the utilitarian calculus going to hell can only be a thing to avoid. But is it not also obvious that there must be some kind of excitement connected to this kind of self-sacrifice? It is not at all difficult to imagine that Don Giovanni is feeling really good about himself as he is repeating his “No” (“So what if I am up against God and the Devil all at the same time, I am going to do what I do no matter what!”). What we find here is a kind of excitement or arousal that is far ‘too much’ for the utilitarianism of the pleasure principle to handle. It is in a sense the senseless pleasure of pain; it is the excitement beyond reward; it is in short enjoyment.

The notion of enjoyment can help us take a final step in our analysis of the Nazi-card-card. Let us take up the two possible answers to Pogge's question above (seemingly the only ones): yes and no. We have already argued that the immediate “No!”, identified by Pogge as the most common answer, is just another way of playing the Nazi-card-card. We have also argued that the arguments for playing this card are at the very least similar to the arguments produced by Eichmann at his trial. It should also be clear, however, that this does not automatically make ‘Eichmänner’ of all of us. It could be that the arguments would be validly exculpating in our case where they were not in Eichmann's, but that is not the point here. Our interest is not culpability but rather the ideological structures which make us assume immediately that we are in no way culpable.

In order to gauge this issue, we should seek to understand the kind of enjoyment that goes into the answers to Pogge's question. Probably the most obvious explanation for why most people immediately answer “No!” would be that we are dealing with a kind of defence mechanism. We do not wish to be confronted with the kind of guilt that is entailed in the question – especially since it is a form of guilt that we are very unlikely to be able to shed. However, this kind of defence mechanism does not really fit the notion of enjoyment very well. Rather, given the Lacanian notion of enjoyment, we should expect people to accept the guilt and gain some form of surplus-enjoyment from this very feeling of guilt. In this way, it is of course the opposite answer to Pogge's question, the immediate “Yes!”, which is most suitable for Lacanian analysis. Indeed, is it not the immediate “Yes!”, and the subsequent enjoyment of being guilty, which is the driving force behind the work of charity that spans from *Médicins sans frontières* to the philanthropy of billionaires? This

precisely is the focus of many of Žižek's articles and books on our contemporary ideological environment. The central ideological problem we are facing today is in the end not the issue of positing the other as some demonic figure (be it as George W. Bush, Barak Obama, Islamic terrorists, drug dealers, etc.). The crucial ideological issue of our time is rather the one that follows immediately after we have confronted the ideology that posits the other as a demonic figure. It is the ideology of liberal totalitarianism, of tolerance, of respect for otherness. Criticizing the ideology of tolerance does not at all force us to accept some form of conservative restoration, even though Žižek may have flirted with the notion of *Leitkultur* (Žižek 2008, p. 21). Žižek's arguments regarding this notion do take away most of the Christian conservative overtones. He explicitly states: "And, to avoid any misunderstanding the same applies to Christianity itself" (ibid.), pointing out that the Catholic Church and the *L'Osservatore Romano* could certainly use a lesson in *Leitkultur* regarding their way of responding to criticism (one could easily add the way in which the Church deals with the abusers of children within its ranks here). Still, that does not take away the fatal flaw inherent in the notion of a *Leitkultur*, namely that it subscribes to some form of culturalism that comes dangerously close to what I am here terming everyday morality. In other words, if we accept the notion of *Leitkultur* do we not then install some kind of authority to which we can enjoy subjecting our will? At this point Zupančič seems to be the more consistent Kantian by insisting upon the idea that the moral law is a half law (Zupančič 2000, p. 163).

In this light, the better critique of the multiculturalist ethics of recognition is the one that puts a focus on the immediate acceptance of guilt, the flagellated enjoyment of being guilty. There is a crucial form of enjoyment which belongs to this sentiment. In many ways, it is the polar opposite of the one we found in Don Giovanni. Don Giovanni's enjoyment is that of the principled ethical rebel. He knows that he faces eternal damnation, but his enjoyment is the one that belongs to not giving up one inch on his principle (his desire, to speak in Lacanian terms), in the face of the most dire consequences. Immediately answering "Yes" to Pogge's question, on the contrary means to happily accept that there is no principle that can be defended in one's own way of life. Here one accepts again a form of eternal damnation (in the shape of eternal guilt), but not because of one's attachment to any form of ethical principle. Instead, it is precisely because one knows and accepts that there is no principle guiding one's life that one succumbs to this. One has no defence for one's own way of life – and that is what produces the enjoyment. There is a specific form of enjoyment that goes into the inwards aggression and self-hatred that belongs to the knowledge that one is *never right*.



Saying “No” to Pogge, and in general playing the Nazi-card-card, means precisely to assert that in this matter one is *never wrong*. But in comparison to the case of Don Giovanni we could hardly say that this “No” is that of a rebel. It is thus not simply a case of stubbornly sticking to one’s own principle against the demand of the Other. Rather the Nazi-card-card is played knowing full well that what one is saying is completely legitimate as a matter of course. This follows from the argument we made above about the positing of Nazism as a demonic other by the Nazi-card-card.

In the case of answering “No” to Pogge immediately, we thus find not only one inversion with regard to answering “Yes”, but two. It is not only that one changes the view of one’s own way of life, but crucially one changes the position of the Other as well. Both in the case of Don Giovanni and in the case of answering “Yes” to Pogge, we find a certain failure to live up to the demands of the Other. Don Giovanni finds enjoyment as a rebel; those who answer “Yes” find it as sinners. But in the case of answering “No”, one is precisely living up to the demand of the Other. And what is more, one is effectively turning oneself into the instrument of this demand. The Lacanian term for making oneself the instrument of the Other is perversion. There is in so many words a clear-cut perverse enjoyment inherent in the playing of the Nazi-card-card.

As mentioned above Žižek has spent quite a lot of energy and ink on the argument that the truly problematic ideological structure we are faced with today is not the one that posits the radical other as evil and illegitimate. Rather, the crucial ideological problem according to Žižek is that we are all too quick to accept our own illegitimacy, and that the very enjoyment inherent in feeling illegitimate is what inhibits any form of (genuine) work towards greater justice. The point I am making in relation to this well-known Žižekian analysis is that there is a kind of Lacanian enjoyment also at stake in the position which Pogge takes to be the dominant one. This enjoyment is not the strange form of pleasure-in-pain, but it is a surplus-enjoyment nonetheless; it is the excessive pleasure-in-pleasure. The enjoyment in the immediate “No” is connected to being in touch with an obvious winner. It is not the pleasure involved in winning a debate, it is rather the surplus-enjoyment in knowing that one is going to win. One already knows that the Other is on one’s side, because one is making oneself into the instrument of his desire. This enjoyment in being obviously right is precisely the enjoyment of the Nazi-card-card.

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