Deliver us from evil? Prospects for living ethically and acting politically in human geography
Paul Cloke

Prog Hum Geogr 2002 26: 587
DOI: 10.1191/0309132502ph391oa

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://phg.sagepub.com/content/26/5/587

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Progress in Human Geography can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://phg.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://phg.sagepub.com/content/26/5/587.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Oct 1, 2002

What is This?
Deliver us from evil? Prospects for living ethically and acting politically in human geography

Paul Cloke
School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, University Road, Clifton, Bristol BS8 1SS, UK

Abstract: This paper addresses the dilemma of how easy it is to talk and write about human geographies of ethics and justice compared to the difficulties of living out those geographies in our everyday life practices. If radical ideas and radical practices are to go hand in hand, we need to address the apparent inability to retain a critical political edge in human geography. The paper comments on new readings of moral and ethical geographies, noting Marc Augé’s distinction between a sense of the other and a sense for the other, and arguing that any goal in human geography for developing an emotional, connected and committed sense for the other may necessitate a prompting of the moral imagination which includes political/ethical/spiritual constellations of issues such as charity, agape and evil. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Melissa Orlie, the paper emphasizes imaginations of power that recognize ‘evil’, the crisis of the citizen-subject, and the recovery of political enthusiasms for ‘invisible powers’. It envisions a human geography in which living ethically and acting politically can be essentially intertwined with a sense for the other in a sensitive, committed and active approach to the subject. This entails both a continuing engagement in collective political action against ordered evil, and taking responsibility for what we have been made to be and for who we are becoming.

Key words: ethics, spirituality, charity, agape, evil, invisible powers.

1 Introduction

At the outset, I want to register my deep-seated sense of regret over the apparent demise of Geography in Lampeter. Although there are people there who are continuing the struggle to maintain a Geography presence in that institution, it seems that the run-down of the subject there will be terminal. Over the years it has been my privilege first to work with, then to admire from a little distance, a wonderful gathering of geographers in that small Welsh town. For me one of the principal characteristics of that
gathering is that the development of a community of the humanity of being human beings has been an essential prerequisite for the development of a community of geographers. That community, in its various different forms, has in turn promoted a very special ‘humanness’ in human geography more generally. The reach and the quality of the Lampeter diaspora bears witness to the continuing vitality of what was created, and is now being dismantled, in the unique habitus of Lampeter.

When I came to Bristol from Lampeter in 1992, I encountered on-street homelessness for the first time in my everyday life, and it was these sites/sights of homelessness which gave grounded expression to the politics and ethics of resisting injustice which I had been quietly cultivating in Lampeter’s intellectually rich environment. The issues faced by homeless people appalled me, even though I had previously read pretty widely on this subject. In particular, my hackles of social justice were raised, prompting questions about what kind of society it was that allowed this very evidently ‘wrong’ and ‘bad’ form of injustice to be sustained. I responded by undertaking regular voluntary work in a local night shelter and partially reorientating my research priorities to take up ‘the cause’ of the homeless. Now I don’t tell you this as a naked act of self-aggrandizement, on at least two counts. First, as Nick Blomley (1994) and Noel Castree (1999) among others have recorded, there is a rich history of social activism in the human geography academy demonstrating life-changing commitment in some cases, and certainly a commitment which far outweighs mine. Second, I have to say that my initial shock of seeing on-street homeless people has subsided, and that my personal response in terms of regular work at the shelter has suffered from a definite sense of fatigue. Mine, then, is definitely not a heroic story. No, I mention my small-scale experience so as to explain how questions about living ethically and acting politically as human geographers are integrally wrapped up in the life experiences of the individual.

The events of this last year have raised similar questions on a bigger canvas. The brutal and horrific murder of thousands of people in the events of 9/11 (as we now call it, seemingly immune to the inherent cultural imperialism of the title) has been avenged by bringing the huge weight of western power to bear on people in Afghanistan, mostly in the form of brutal and horrific destructive armaments. Meanwhile, the silent daily death of tens of thousands of children in the two-thirds world is allowed to go, relatively, unnoticed.

My overriding question concerns how to bring these senses of being appalled into our life and work as human geographers. My nagging suspicion is that many of us face dilemmas about how easy it is to talk and write about human geographies of ethics and justice compared to the difficulties of living out those geographies in our everyday life practices.

It is with this emphasis on the symbiosis of ideas and practice that I have to own up to mixed feelings about the current state of some human geography. The cultural turn has been exciting, and the emphases on difference, discourse, representation and performance have each brought new light to society space and nature, and have reinvigorated discussion about, for example, place and embodiment as well as the interconnectedness of all of these. Why, then, do I have nagging doubts that despite this intellectual excellence we may be losing our way a little, and why do I find myself particularly frustrated by our apparent inability to retain a critical political edge in human geography? It almost seems as though as we become theoretically more sophisticated...
in identifying difference and differentiating identity, so our ability to offer imaginative and practical guidelines for doing something about anything appears to be diminishing. In part, such sentiments reflect fears expressed by Chris Philo (2000: 44) about ‘an impulse towards both dematerializing and desocializing human geography’, but, in addition, they convey a sense of unfulfilled potential with respect to sociocultural geography’s ‘moral turn’ (Smith, 1999). While we now understand some of the subtleties and differences previously plastered over by reductionist and ‘tanky’ political economies, the resultant emphasis on identity politics seems to have evaded important issues relating, for example, to the interconnectivities between one identity group’s freedom and another’s oppression, or to the grounds on which relative priority is distributed among different forms of social exclusion. Part of my human geography struggle, then, is to keep hold of certain baseline ethical judgements, and senses of good and evil. For me, a significant part of the envisioning of future human geographies is to develop a more critical understanding of these issues through new readings of moral and ethical geographies.

II Moral geographies

Scholars such as David Smith and James Proctor have provided excellent cartographies of moral terrains in human geography, and these brook no repetition here (Proctor and Smith, 1999). However, I want to question whether the ‘progress’ made over the last decade in unfolding geographies of morality and ethics has presented human geographers with any new, and critical, apparatus with which to ‘do something about anything’. Felix Driver (1991) warns that the interest in morality should be less of a return to timeless concerns and more of a reflection of the need to respond to the significant political and intellectual shifts of the times. Could it be that the ensuing response in human geography has more often been motivated by intellectual rather than political shifts, with a consequent underplaying of the need to connect ideas with practices?

Any such blunt conclusion immediately seems harsh and disrespectful to those in human geography for whom action has been a characteristic geographical practice. It is, however, instructive to return to Chris Philo’s (1991) vision in *New words, new worlds* for the potential scope of moral geographies. Here he reflects on the geographies of, and in, everyday moralities. Geographies of morality refer to: ‘the different moral assumptions and supporting arguments that particular peoples in particular places make about “good” and “bad”/”right” and “wrong”/”just” and “unjust”/”worthy” and “unworthy”’ (p. 16) and reflect the varying scales of assumptions made about the inclusion and exclusion of people from particular social groups and the codes by which they live. Geographies in everyday moralities suggest that issues of space, place, environment, landscape and so on are often built into the very heart of moral arguments and assumptions. Philo also spotlights the potential value of human geographers reflecting on their own morality, in order to identify the impacts of the values brought by geographers to their own work. At their most basic, such reflections identify the blurred moral biases inherent in scientific objectivism, or vague appeals to broad humanism. Some, however, will in Philo’s view wish to go further, either by exploring particular forms of moral rootedness (for example in Marxist or Christian
concepts of human freedom), or by proceeding: ‘from the “common moral talk” of the people and places that we study to the deeper moral presuppositions informing the lives of these people and places, and . . . allowing these revealed moralities to guard how we – as outsiders maybe needing to unlearn our own presuppositions – evaluate what we find occurring here’ (p. 27).

Many geographers found, and continue to find, this vision really exciting. Surveys of the geographies of, and in, everyday moralities promised the very nuanced and critical readings that many human geographers found lacking in the subject. In one of my own areas of interest, for example – geographies of rurality – there has been an emergent recognition of how rurality is implicated with morality. A recent essay by right-wing think-tanker Roger Scruton (1998) presents an interesting illustration. He describes a contemporary *moral mobility* in Britain, by which people are able to break loose from their traditional codes of conduct and experiment with lifestyles which were once the privilege of the rich and glamorous. Such moral mobility, Scruton, with Anthony Barnett, argues (Barnett and Scruton, 1998: xvi):

> . . .has shaken rural society, since it has removed its self-image: as the repository of changeless values in a world of change. Rural people can no longer attract their children home from the cities with a promise of old-fashioned decencies and good homely sentiment. Those who love the pattern and rhythm of rural society must accept the paradox that it is now only by a conscious effort that a sense of rootedness can be revived.

Here, then, is a picture of rurality as a repository of moral values, an amalgam of spatial and moral assumptions. This, however, is a very particular form of moral discernment. In Scruton’s argument, the value of the countryside lies precisely in a well-bounded series of ‘we-feelings’ – in morally prescribed shared values which cohere in a narrowly constructed sense of common destiny, inheritance and continuity. Accordingly, the vision for future countrysides involves opposing the loss of social order, community attachment and environmental stillness, and contesting the social entropy which is seen to lie at the heart of the postmodern condition.

Scruton’s moral reading of contemporary rurality itself excludes rural people who are unable or unwilling to share in his ‘we-feelings’. These morally prescribed values of the rural render unthinkable problems such as poverty and homelessness in rural spaces, as my own research with Paul Milbourne and Rebekah Widdowfield has sought to establish (Cloke et al., 2000a). It is this very sense of exclusion which has prompted a very different reading of geography and morality in rural areas; a reading which has reflected the marginalization of ‘others’ in rural contexts (Cloke and Little, 1997).

French anthropologist Marc Augé (1998) has suggested that we need to be sensitive to two strands of otherness. First, he urges a sensitivity to a *sense of the other*, a sense of what has meaning for others and of that which they elaborate upon. Over the last decade in particular, it is clear that human geographers have been active in this respect. In geographies of the rural, for example, there has been a listening to ‘other’ voices and a looking through ‘other’ windows onto the rural world. Such activities have brought an understanding of some of the moral geographies which are instituted among and lived out by people belonging to particular social and identity groups. This trajectory of research has been at once fruitful and problematic. A rich vein of understanding regarding processes of exclusion and marginalization has been accompanied by well-documented (see, for example, Doel, 1994) philosophical and methodological problems: the tendency to lock ‘others’ into the thought-prison of the same; the tendency to
illustrate ‘otherness’ in terms of a series of sociocultural variables (age, gender, sexuality and the like) often without serious commitment to the particular issues and people involved, and without a complete sense of the range of ‘other’ geographies; and the real difficulties in moving beyond ‘others of the same’ to the ‘other of the other’, that which is unfamiliar, unexplainable and unrecognizable.

Here, Marc Augé’s second strand of sensitivity to otherness seems highly relevant. He also urges a sensitivity to a sense for the other. Here I return to my nagging doubts about much of the current interplay between moral geographies and a critical political edge to human geography which incorporates active practice as well as intellectual transformation. In broad terms, I believe that it is easy to detect in human geography an abstract, intellectually fascinated, but often uncommitted sense of the other. However, with some significant and notable exceptions, I believe it is far more difficult to discover in contemporary human geography as a whole a sense for the other which is emotional, connected and committed. This is due at least in part to the academic environment itself. Inevitably the self-serving nature of contemporary research conditions in human geography is conspiring against the development of a sustained sense for the other. Too often, research will inescapably be connected with the professional need to attract research funding, and publication will be about fulfilling the requirements and expectations of an academic career. Moreover, the unwillingness to promote and fund long-term, longitudinal research has created the conditions for ‘flip’ ethnographies by which researchers too often breeze in and out of research situations, with insufficient commitment to the people and issues concerned. However, such contingent conditions only partly explain the phenomenon. The lack of a sense for the other is grounded in the choices we make about how to live ethically and act politically.

Having reached such a sweeping conclusion, I should immediately admit that I find two particular reasons for optimism in the search for a prioritized, committed sense for the other in human geography. First, there does seem to be a significant commitment to the process of developing a geographically sensitive ethics, and an ethically sensitive geography. If such a process is to be viewed as a journey, then not only are more human geographers seemingly willing to travel but also the quality of the guidebooks which accompany such travel has increased sharply in recent years (see, for example, Smith, 2000; Proctor and Smith, 1999). As Iain Hay (1998) has recently commented, these signs of progress are not so much because of the imposition of new ethical codes or guidelines but more because of the introduction of more flexible prompts for moral contemplation which have stimulated and nurtured moral imaginations in human geography research. Brief mention of four such prompts illustrates how the ethical crosscuts (sometimes long-standing) political themes in human geography:

1) The acceptance of a need for greater levels of ‘normative self-criticality’ (Sayer and Storper, 1997: 11) among human geographers, especially in view of the moral propositions which are unwittingly or unreflectively deployed in the pursuit of human geography. Self-criticality needs to embrace not only the substantive topics of research but also the practices involved in the doing of human geography.

2) The emerging agreement that moral positions in human geography need to be justified in terms of improving the lives of others, rather than in terms of self-interest or traditional practices (Sack, 1997). There are important implications here for reciprocity between researcher and researched, especially highlighting the need
for research to make a practical contribution to the lives of people being studied (Herman and Mattingley, 1999).

3) The recognition of interconnections between the symbolic processes of culture and the material processes of politics and economics, leading to exploration of the links between cultural domination and political economic exploitation in defining the problematic, and between identity recognition and socioeconomic redistribution in searching for responses to the problematic (see Fraser, 1995).

4) The willingness to take seriously the notion of evil (Tuan, 1999), both as a significant element in disturbing relationships between people and other people, and between people and nature, and as a consequence of a compartmentalized and disconnected world. The former points us to the destructiveness, cruelty and contempt which can result from uneven power relations, and the latter represents a morally problematic separation between our selves and others.

These prompts, although still the subject of occasionally fierce contestation, seem to suggest the emergence of a more ethically nuanced, if polyvocal, human geography. Moreover, Tuan’s discussion of ‘evil’ introduces a more spiritual dimension and leads me to my second point of optimism.

III The possibility for spiritual geographies

‘Some of the lost moral certainties of earlier ages need to be recovered, not as fixed and repressive codes, but as carefully crafted anchors to prevent continuing drift in a sea of relativism or “nihilism”’ (Smith, 2000: 214). For many human geographers, the recovery of lost moral certainties will be anathema to the deconstructive relativism which holds a dominant position in the so-called ‘cultural turn’ (Cook et al., 2000). For others, the notion of moral certainty will only be found in the theoretical steadfastness of political ideology. However, I want to argue that new readings of moral and ethical geographies can be enhanced significantly by reference to aspects of spirituality, albeit paying strong heed to David Smith’s predilection for ‘anchor points’ rather than repressive behavioural codes. Apart from the motivational experience of faith in my own life (Cloke, 1994), there seem to me to be both material and philosophical prompts to the inclusion of spirituality in human geography’s discussion of morality, ethics and politics.

First, a considerable proportion of the world’s population subscribes to a particular established religion. For example, Patrick Johnstone’s (1995) projections for the year 2000 indicate very significant religious adherence worldwide (1800 million Christians, 1300 million Muslims, 800 million Hindus, 700 million Buddhists, and so on). Moreover, non-established spiritual activity is on the rise. Michael Brown (1997) suggests that in the USA, for example, some 12 million people actively participate in New Age activities, with another 30 million more peripherally involved. This scale of religious adherence and spiritual involvement inevitably suggests that aspects of spirituality (some perhaps more concerned with social justice than others) will have become intertwined with dominant moral codes in different parts of the world. Thus, for example, when Anglo-American geography involves itself with moral rootedness, even using the neo-Kantian idea of ‘common moral talk’, it seems very likely that the moral
Precepts of Christian traditions will have found their ways into secular laws, assumptions and expectations. This material presence of what was originally constructed as spiritual morality in what has now become secularized society and government suggests considerable scope for continuing to understand moral and ethical codes through a spiritual lens. It should be added that in the ‘secular’ society of Britain, for example, a very considerable proportion of voluntary social action which has filled the vacuum created by a retreating welfare state has been associated with the motivation of a spiritual faith (Conradson, 1999). In this case Christian ethics are continuing to have a material impact on action for social justice.

These material presences are connected with philosophical prompts in moral and ethical landscapes. Such prompts have often been construed as extremely negative. As Roger Stump (2000) has pointed out, the greatest negative impact of spirituality on such landscapes stems from obsessive fundamentalism (p. 216):

The absolute certainty of fundamentalism has important consequences because it precludes the possibility of compromise with others with whom they disagree. Fundamentalists see the conflicts in which they are involved in strictly dualistic terms – as a struggle between good and evil. In their view, the only satisfactory solution to such a struggle is complete victory. To achieve victory, moreover, they presume that they must assert some form of territorial control. Indeed, they believe that they are both entitled to and obliged to wield such control because they alone have access to the truth.

However, to hold fundamental belief in other spiritually inspired moral codes which reverse the natural order of power – prioritizing the weak over the strong, the neighbour over the self, love over hatred, and so on – suggests a capacity for the prompting of very different, and socially very positive, effects, not least a rediscovery of the necessity for charity in philosophies of citizenship.

As an illustration of the potential philosophical power of spiritual faith on moral and ethical landscapes, I turn briefly to the (re)discovery of Christian principles by two well-known European authors, who approach the legacy of Christian thought from substantially different directions. Gianni Vattimo is a philosopher from Turin. In *Belief* (1999) he argues that the Christian inheritance needs to be emphasized because of its relevance to contemporary culture, which has become what it is because ‘it has been “worked” and forged in friendship by the Christian message’ (p. 33). He writes (p. 33):

I have begun to take Christianity seriously again because I have constructed a philosophy inspired by Neitzsche and Heidegger, and have interpreted my experience in the contemporary world in the light of it; yet, in all probability, I constructed my philosophy because I started with the Christian inheritance, which I have now found again, though, in reality, I had never abandoned it.

Vattimo’s recovery of Christianity is inextricably linked with the philosophical notion of charity. He argues that the guiding thread of the interpretation of Old Testament biblical doctrine by Jesus is ‘the new and more profound relation to charity established between God and humanity, and consequently between human beings themselves’ (p. 49). This essential charitable impulse is present in many types of common moral talk, and Vattimo’s nihilistic recovery of Christianity represents an interesting route by which to expose the Christian core values of many ethical and moral ‘anchors’ in western society.

My second illustration concerns Slavoj Zizek, a social scientist from Ljubljana. In *The fragile absolute* (2000) he argues that there is a direct lineage of Christianity to Marxism, and that Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side against what he
regards as the onslaught of new spiritualisms. The authentic Christian legacy, he suggests, is far too precious to be left to the ‘freaks’ of fundamentalism. Zizek’s thesis majors on the significance of agape, the Christian concept of love as charity expounded in St Paul’s biblical letters, which, rather than being understood as a spontaneous overflow of generosity, or a self-assertive stance, should, he argues, be viewed ‘as a self-suppressing duty to love neighbours and care for them, as hard work, as something to be accomplished through the strenuous effort of fighting and inhibiting one’s pathological inclinations’ (p. 100). Zizek contrasts this agape attitude to the neighbour/other with New Age attitudes which in his view ultimately reduce the neighbour/other to some kind of mirror-image of the self, or to a step along the path of self-realization, thereby reducing others to external projections of disavowed aspects of the self personality.

Agape, then, is identified as the key intermediary between faith and hope – a very significant set of practices to be worked at. It is an inspired love which enjoins us to ‘unplug’ from the organic community in which we find ourselves, and to plug into a sense for the other. Agape suspends the social hierarchy. Jesus, for example, clearly regarded those who were viewed socially as the lowest of the low – outcasts, beggars, prostitutes and especially the poor – as founder members of his radically new sense of community. As Zizek argues, ‘such an “unplugging” as the direct expression of love has nothing whatsoever to do with the escape into an idealized Romantic universe in which all concrete social differences magically disappear’ (p. 127). Rather it is ‘the active work of love which necessarily leads to the creation of an alternative community’ (pp. 129–30).

These two illustrations each involve the recovery of lost moral certainties in the spiritual realm. Vattimo’s recovery of Christian charity and Zizek’s rediscovery of Christian ‘agape’ love which engenders a radical reorganization in ethical attitudes to the social hierarchy, and plugs into a sense for the other, represent important spiritual prompts to the moral and ethical landscapes traversed by human geographers. Their essays of personal experience also suggest that seemingly atheistic explorations in social theory and philosophy can reveal interesting lineage – connections with the spiritual philosophies of Christianity. Although the brief account here hardly scratches the surface of these issues, there certainly seems to be scope for far greater attention to be given by human geographers to spiritual dimensions of love, faith and charity, as well as to the equally important ideas of sin and evil, both as very significant ethical anchors and as one pathway to a more prioritized and committed sense for the other in geographical thinking and research. My argument here is not that of the proselytizer. Human geographers will approach these issues from very different positions of faith, ideology, agnosticism and pragmatism. Rather, my argument is that the goal for human geography of discovering an emotional, connected and committed sense for the other may necessitate a prompting of the moral imagination which includes political/ethical/spiritual constellations of issues such as charity and agape, and evil. For further discussion of such constellations, I want to turn briefly to the work of Hannah Arendt.
Hannah Arendt: a recasting of the political?

Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (1997: 1) say this of Hannah Arendt:

Brilliant, demanding, inspiring, original, and sometimes perverse, her writings offer an important resource for theorists who would conceptualize a politics in which questions of meaning, identity and value take centre stage. Arendt frequently frustrates, but her work is indispensable for those who would learn how to take human plurality seriously, how to grasp public life not just as an occasion for choice but also as an opportunity for different human beings to make a world in common, and how to address the problems of not just suboptimal utility but also violence and evil.

Born in 1906 in Germany, Arendt grew up as part of the Jewish community in Koningsberg. As a teenager she read Kierkegaard, Kant and Jaspers, and at university she fell under the intellectual and personal spell of Heidegger. In 1929, she married the Jewish intellectual and writer Gunther Stern and, in developing severe doubts about Zionism, she became, as John McGowan (1998: 2) notes, ‘deeply committed to a pluralist model of polity in which all citizens learn to live amid differences’. Arendt was politically active in Nazi Germany, compiling evidence of anti-semitism, and providing refuge for persecuted communists. After a brief period of arrest and detention she fled to Paris, where she met Walter Benjamin, and in 1940 she was married for a second time – to Heinrich Blucher, a non-Jewish German Marxist.

In remarkable circumstances, Arendt managed to travel to New York in 1941, taking with her deep insights concerning the experience of statelessness. She quickly learnt English and began to write. The origins of totalitarianism (1951) brought her academic recognition, and was followed by other essays, notably The human condition (1958), Between past and future (1961), Crises of the republic (1972) and The life of the mind (published posthumously in 1978). However, it was her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 that made Arendt (in)famous. In Eichmann in Jerusalem: on the banality of evil (1963) she paints Eichmann both as the architect of the holocaust, and as a completely ordinary man, so enveloped in the task in hand that he lost the capacity to distinguish right from wrong. This elision of the monstrous and the banal prompted heated debate, but encapsulates Arendt’s important contribution to the recasting of the political. For the purposes of this paper, I want briefly to mention three significant aspects of Arendtian politics.

1 Resisting totalitarianism

For Arendt, it was the totalitarian form of rule which set the horizons for the experience of core ethical problems. Her work presents a consistent response to the political evils of the twentieth century in which humanity and human beings were somehow being made superfluous in the pursuit of superstate objectives. Arendt, then, as Kimberley Curtis (1999: 12) explains, ‘seeks to re-sacralize our feeling for human particularity, to teach us to feel quickened, awed, and pleased by it through the cultivation of the specific aesthetic sensibility. This sensibility is ethically rooted in, and must be evaluated in relationship to, an analysis of those evils which, in our time, most menace our capacity to form human lives’. Accordingly, Arendt’s emphasis is not only on knowing the worlds of the ‘other’ so that we can know the ‘other’, but also on the cultivation of sensibility so as to be able to live in a world which feels its suffering and
its deprivation, and experiences the menace of evil. Meaningfulness is lost by ‘enacting oblivion towards others and thus proliferating loneliness’ (Curtis, 1999: 153). Meaningfulness is gained by a sense for the other and a responsiveness to the complexity and changing nature of human plurality. In some ways, then, Arendt argues for what Vattimo and Zizek find in charity and agape respectively.

2 Recognizing evil

The concept of evil is central to Arendt’s analysis of the political failures of society, yet there is considerable debate over the precise formulation of evil in her work (Leonard, 1997). Originally she characterized a ‘radical evil’ as the totalitarian transformation of human nature so as to eliminate the key conditions required to live a human life – including spontaneity, individuality and plurality. This ‘radical evil’ transcends that which can be accounted for by the evil intentions of individuals. It is deep-rooted and perhaps (given Arendt’s background in the Jewish community) might embrace some sense of the demonic. Later, as Richard Bernstein (1997) records, Arendt turns from this idea of radical evil to propose the notion of ‘extreme’ evil capable of overgrowing and laying waste to the world precisely because it spreads rather like a fungus on the surface rather than being deep-rooted or demonic. This revision from ‘radical’ to ‘extreme’ takes in Arendt’s conclusion that Eichmann’s trial demonstrated the ‘banality’ of evil. She increasingly believed that the capacity to distinguish good from evil presupposes the mental activities of thinking and judging, aided by the voice of conscience. It was precisely these activities which she found lacking in Eichmann. In Thinking and moral considerations (1971) she states:

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of ‘the banality of evil’ and meant with this no theory of doctrine but something quite fractured, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behaviour during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.

Arendt’s analysis raised a storm of contention, not least because it appeared to some to excuse the monstrous by describing it as banal, and it appeared to reject spiritual dimensions of evil and wickedness. Nevertheless, what Arendt opens up here is both the recognition of the place of evil in imaginations of power and power relations, and the pursuit of what John McGowan (1997: 263) calls ‘a polity (constitutions and compacts), ways of acting in concert (performatives in the space of appearances before others) and a phenomenology of relatedness (including the crucial acts of promising and forgiving)’.

3 Action, politics and freedom

Arendt’s work crucially emphasized a constellation of three ideas, which for her constituted the basis of acting politically. The first idea is the capacity for action – the ability of initiative, spontaneous activity and innovation to disrupt causal chains of processes and practices. A gloomy acceptance of an inability to change things represents
an abrogation of the responsibility to recognize the extent of this capacity for action, as well as a fear that the engagement of this capacity may demand significant and uncomfortable changes in the (self-centred) ways in which we live our lives. The second idea is a politics of doing. As Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (1998: 2) notes, ‘because we tend to associate initiative and creativity with science, technology and the material world, Arendt stressed doing rather than making, praxis rather than poiesis’. Again there is a critique here of the frequent human resistance to acknowledging the degree to which our life-patterns reflect what we do – such patterns may not have been originated by our own choosing, but they are often sustained by our doing. While we may not be able to change these life patterns alone, there are strong prospects for a collective politics of undoing and redoing. The third idea is antithetical to contemporary framing of freedom as wrapped up in individual rights to privatize and personalize. Real freedom, for Arendt, represents a collective bringing together of the human capacity for action for the purposed of changing what is wrong in the current shared arrangement.

Each of these ideas has an alternative counterpart: for action read behaviour; for politics read the social; for freedom read necessity. Arendt’s recasting of the political, although frustratingly not fully worked through, provides human geographers with provocative and action-orientated markers for developing a connected and committed sense for the other. In the last part of this paper, I want to apply these markers to a more concrete agenda for ethical, and perhaps spiritual, human geographies.

V Living ethically, acting politically

Melissa Orlie’s (1997) book *Living ethically, acting politically* draws on Foucauldian theory, Arendtian politics and empirical studies of the early seventeenth century Quaker movement to present something of a manifesto for ethical-political action in the circumstances of contemporary power. She demonstrates how an appreciation for our capacity for spiritual natality can regenerate distinctive senses of freedom, responsibility and ethical-political possibility. Orlie’s grounded application of Arendtian ideas offers us a framework for setting out some of the steps which can be taken towards more nuanced and committed ethical-political geographies. I offer these steps as waymarkers rather than an exclusive route, in line with David Smith’s notion of ‘anchor’ points rather than as fixed or repressive codes. Three such waymarkers are presented here.

1 Imaginations of power that recognize ‘evil’

It is my belief that human geography needs to sponsor imaginations of power that recognize ‘evil’ in various forms. In the past, there has tended to be a focus on particular loci of power such as capital, class, government policy, individualism and the like. However, we exist amid historical harm and wrongdoing, and among inherited and institutionalized advantage and disadvantage. Our relations with those seemingly like ourselves, and with ‘others’, are suffused by individual and collective harms, located both in the past and in the present. Clearly, given my own faith-beliefs, I want to give
due emphasis to demonic and personal forms of evil here, both as invisible powers in the world and as crucial components of the environment of individual behaviour. However, it also seems important to recognize that often we do not possess these powers that bring harm or disadvantage to others. Rather we are constituted by and through such powers. This is not to suggest that malevolent evil and malicious crime do not remain significant factors in our society and space. Indeed, it is in this form that evil is easiest to agree about and to organize collective resistance to. However, it is also clear that a more ordinary evil exists as the product of what Arendt calls ‘trespasses’: the lack of thought about the unanticipated/invisible/distant effects our actions may have on others, just because our actions are simply fitting in with the prevailing norms of socio-economic life. As Orlie (1997: 21) explains:

According to Arendt, trespasses inevitably inhere in all human activities because as we locate ourselves in the world we establish new relationships . . . We can neither undo trespasses ourselves nor prevent them: they occur under circumstances where we did not or could not have known what we were doing . . . Trespasses are unavoidable because they flow not from our intentions per se but from makings and unmakings as they constitute and condition us. We trespass against others when we pursue a living and create a home. Furthermore, at least potentially, or some of the time, we are trespassed against.

Such ordinary evil will have important spatiality, since it is often in the spatial ‘spreading’ of consequences away from the sites of unintended or unthinking actions that everyday evils (such as not having enough to eat or drink, not having a roof over their head, not having clothes to wear, getting sick, imprisoned, excluded and so on) become manifested.

Trespass, then, constitutes thoughtlessness rather than wickedness. In contemporary times, we recognize that we live in the context of organizations which are seemingly organized by no one, yet which cause harm to others in a systematic manner. This recognition can be used to suggest that if no one is responsible for harmful outcomes then no one is free to change them. The individual conscience can be as sensitive as it likes in such situations, because the individual is deemed to have little or no capacity to make an impact on these ordinary evils.

Could it be, then, that systematic power relations are being sustained, and even elaborated, by the routinized behaviour of the collectivity of individuals? Individual behaviour may well be conforming to contemporary notions of ethically sound conduct. Contracts are being kept. Behaviour is reasonable and predictable, malicious action is avoided. Yet ordinary evil is not diminished by this seemingly ‘ethical’ behaviour, and indeed may well be sustained by it. Orlie suggests to us that the predominant political ethos (or ‘social rule’) of contemporary governance and the preponderant ways of thinking and activity promoted by it (in Foucault’s terms, ‘governmentality’) are unable to affect a suitable response to the ethical-political issues posed by ordinary evil.

This point can be illustrated powerfully by reference to the issue of homelessness with which I started this paper. I want to claim that homelessness is evil. Sometimes it does arise as a result of malevolent or malicious action, but more often it is an effect of more ordinary evils by which individuals, families, landlords, public-sector departments, charities and governments are bound together in social relations which produce and reproduce the harmful effects which we construct as homelessness. Accordingly, it is usual for no one but the victims themselves to be held responsible for homelessness. Personal consciences can be held broadly clear, and daily routine
behaviour can be regarded as reasonable, ethical and even sympathetic towards homeless people, all without any response to the needs of such people. We thereby sustain systemic power relations between the ‘homed’ and the ‘homeless’.

It seems crucial for the future of human geography to explore imaginations of power that recognize both the outcomes of ordered evils and the harmful trespasses of more ordinary evils.

2 The crisis of the subject

Orlie (1997: 42) states:

As subject-citizens incorporate social powers, they engender and elaborate governing effects and become sovereign, individually and collectively, which is to say, they increasingly become one and uniform. By this method of popular authorization, the conventional is made essential and the freely subject produce social necessities. As a consequence, competing and conflicting bodies/minds are made governable. Ordinary evil ceases to be a visual problem to the extent that it is ordered.

By recognizing ordinary evil alongside more ordered evil, and by realizing that predominant rationalities constitute us as sometimes thoughtless agents of the governing powers that multiply trespasses, we encounter once again a crisis of the subject. Orlie draws on Foucault to examine the difficulty of forming ourselves as ethical subjects of our actions, and identifies two sets of issues which again seem crucial in envisioning the future of human geography. First, there is the problem of responsibility. Too often, it seems, we find that we can neither recognize the harm brought to others by our imbrocation in social rules and their governing ways of representing and constructing the world, nor imagine how such harm might be alleviated. The outcome is an often numbing inability and/or unwillingness to grasp responsibility for the social rather than the individual. Second, there is the problem of freedom. Our own actions, and those of others, can become thwarted by the constrictive patterns of the social, and undermined by the unthinking nature of some social behaviour. In combination, it can be argued that we have not yet found an effective way of thinking through issues of responsibility and freedom without instinctive reference to an original unified agent of power, whether this be individual or collective. We are still, in Foucault’s terms, searching for the head of a headless body politic.

Recognizing these problems of responsibility and freedom permits a reorientation of the approach we often take to understanding sociospatial issues. For example, in the recent work on homelessness in rural areas, carried out by Paul Milbourne, Rebekah Widdowfield and myself, we have recognized a widespread sense of denial that homelessness exists in the countryside (Cloke et al., 2000b; 2000c). Even where the issue is tentatively accepted as something more than a figment of the academic imagination, we have encountered immediate attribution of responsibility for rural homelessness to obvious external targets: the government is not doing enough; the cities should take more responsibility; there needs to be more input from charities; and so on. There has been little or no recognition that buying into, or maintaining, the traditional moralities embedded in sociocultural constructs of rural life will result in an imbrication in social rules and governing ways of seeing and doing in rural areas which bring harm to homeless people, or those in poverty. We have detected little by way of imagination about how to alleviate such harm, other than wishing it away to the cities. In this
situation, then, the freedom of the self and the freedom of others are thereby restricted, and the search remains for some unified agent of power to blame, not least focusing on the victims of homelessness themselves. As Orlie argues, ‘The predominant political ethos, or “social rule”, of late modern states and the prevalent ways of thinking and acting that it promotes ... are ill-suited to the ethical and political dilemmas posed by ordinary evil’ (p. 12). In other words, the imaginations of power that we so often deploy in human geography serve to sanction a political ethos which pre-empts the political conditions required to live ethically in the face of ordinary evil. Thus political ethos occasions a crisis of the subject by obstructing the political bodies through which individuals might become more thoughtful agents of the powers which frame their conduct and through which they, in turn, shape the actions of others.

3 Invisible powers

By posing the question of what directions we can follow to go beyond the crisis of the citizen-subject, Orlie encourages us to recover political enthusiasms for ‘invisible powers’ (1997: 63):

Reconceiving the head of the body politic entails experimenting with the relationships among ‘body’, ‘mind’, and ‘soul’, between corporeality and incorporeality, between visibility and invisibility. In other words, we must explore alternative political theologies as different ways of naming and enlisting invisible powers.

These invisible powers can be recognized both outside of us (that is the workings of God and his angels; the intervention of good and evil external spirits and ‘ghosts’) and within (that is the responses of our souls, our internal spirituality, our ability to communicate with external invisible powers).

Orlie’s own study of seventeenth century Quakerism suggests one such political theology of invisible powers. The Quakers, she argues, held revelation to be a continual possibility. The ability and right to act in new ways, to distance themselves from ordinary concerns and to transfigure everyday life represented a collaboration between thoughts/words/deeds and invisible powers which opened up a gap between past and future, and (re)created space for different thinking and new actions. In this example, then, the Quakers were seeking something which was different from what governing powers had made them to be. Chris Philo (1997) notes similar attributes among the Shakers of Shaker Lane. The search for the ‘something other’ here is, however, fuelled by intuitive rather than discursive reasoning, by a spiritual perception. Although the Quakers were eventually seen to lose some of the qualities of this search, because of their acceptance of establishment recognition in other spheres, Orlie recognizes in them invisible powers, which related to the spiritual realm, and which were crucial in the productivity of individual and collective embodied action, including the challenge to the trespasses of ordinary evil.

Our analysis of contemporary power relations, then, might do well to recognize these spiritual concerns. If political thinking and action work within the limits of our selves and of our world, then it may be in the spiritual realm that hope lies for transgressing these limits; for allowing the invisible within and without us to unsettle the ordinariness of the visible. These spiritual matters can, of course, take different forms. There is room here for deliberation and perhaps discovery of the spiritual associated with the divine, as Orlie’s study of the Quakers demonstrates so effectively. Gianni Vattimo’s
‘charity’ and Slavoj Zizek’s ‘agape’ both, for example, suggest a legitimate Christian legacy of allowing the invisible within us to unsettle contemporary attitudes and relationships of self and other. Equally, for some (including, of course, Hannah Arendt) the spiritual need not be conceived as associated with the divine. Either way, human geography may do well to respond to the idea that something within us (‘spirit’) can and does exceed any particular instantiation of individual conscience and reason. We do, therefore, need to recognize the invisible within us that deals with the invisibles of the world.

VI Living and acting?

My argument here, then, following Arendt and Orlie, is that ethical and political thinking and action can unleash and enlist those aspects of our spiritual selves that exceed governing forms of individual conscience and public reason. In this way we can reveal, and maybe even hope to address, the impacts of ordinary evil. We cannot substantially change what we are – how and what we have been made to be by history, institutional frames and patterns of social rule, for which no single person can be responsible. However, we can become responsible for who we are – how we live with, and impose on others, the social effects which configure what we appear to be.

Such a recognition has, I believe, important implications for how we adopt political and ethical positions both in and beyond the academy. First, there is a need to recognize appropriate ethical and political practices among the issues we study. A significant element of this search is to look for evidence of ‘spirited’ political thinking and action, which transgresses the limits of the self. This going-beyond-the-self will not always be good, just or freedom-enabling. Yet, in relation to substantive issues, such as that of homelessness, it is possible to conceive of a going-beyond-the-self in which new forms of selfless responsibility, freedom and resistance are expressed for the benefit and inclusion of homeless people. Such practices may take the form of recognizable collective action, fuelled by ideological, charitable, spiritual or volunteering motives; or it may be smaller, more individual, more radical, including the resistances of homeless people themselves.

Second, being responsible for who we are also turns the spotlight on ourselves – not being content merely with mapping our ethical terrains as academics, researchers, geographers, are we ready to ask difficult but crucial questions about the importance of invisible powers and the potential for agape in our own being, of which such work is only a part? What ‘free actions’ do we engage in – for example by following our inclination to associate only with colleagues/neighbours/friends with whom we readily feel comfortable, and thereby in our making of assumptions about ‘others’ – which reinforce social rule, and contribute to ordinary evils which may exclude or harm others? Ethical and political action in human geography may require us to contest and transfigure what we are made to be, so as to reveal who we are becoming – not least in order to cultivate a sensibility which permits an ability to live in the world in such a way as to feel its suffering and experience the menace of evil.
VII Conclusion

It does seem to me that we are in fact increasingly, maybe more than ever before in human history, jointly bringing about disasters for ourselves and each other, knowing that we are doing so, yet somehow unable to stop. More and more the conditions under which we live are the resultants of human activity, and more and more they seem to constrain, cripple, impoverish, and destroy millions of human lives, while we stand by – or rather, sit in front of our television sets or our computers – wringing our hands and blaming each other. (Pitkin, 1998: 252)

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s conclusion to her analysis of Arendt’s concept of the social is particularly poignant given the academic penchant for sitting in front of a PC, or in front of a class, and metaphorically wringing hands. My argument, inspired by those human geographers who are already way ahead of me on these issues, is that it does not have to be this way. We can envision a human geography in which living ethically and acting politically can be essentially intertwined with a sense for the other in a sensitive, committed and active approach to the subject.

Such a human geography would entail a continuing engagement in collective political action against ordered evil. Equally, it necessitates processes and practices which add up to a taking responsibility for what we have been made to be and for who we are becoming. Taking responsibility will not equate to a simple increase in our agency, for we would still be implicated in distant harms, and disjunctures in will/capacity/desire would remain sources of ethical crisis. Rather, taking responsibility will involve an engagement with the conjunction between individual conduct and invisible powers; an exploration of the participant role of our selves, and others, in the authority of political contexts without authors – in the headless bodies politic.

In practice, such a vision will entail:

1) being open to plurality, and problematizing what we take as given, necessary, ordinary or ordered, both within and without ourselves;
2) refusing to reinscribe social rule, and assuming responsibility for trespasses by seeking to interrupt rather than repeat them;
3) forgiving and releasing these trespasses, and promising to redirect how our effects bear upon the future;
4) understanding the importance of invisible powers, and unleashing aspects of the spiritual which exceed governing forms of individual conscience and public reason.

Is this too idealistic, or a wallowing in pious hope? My concern is that, with notable exceptions, we have begun to lose sight of key aspects of human collectivity in our work: the ability to be organized in such a way as to bring about concerted and effective action; the ability to encourage others to act, particularly those who see no need, or who do not know how to go about it; the ability to recognize real capacities for action and to resist the systematic distortion of issues which prevents us from acting effectively together; and the ability to think as an actor, and not just think about action. My dream is that we can add a critical edge to the political-ethical becoming of human geography by making visible, and responding to, what is ordinarily invisible, silent and outside. Idealistic or not, I prefer this vision to some of the more cynical, and perhaps even hypocritical, alternatives.
Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the really helpful and supportive comments on a previous draft of this paper from Sarah Johnsen, Jon May, Paul Milbourne and Chris Philo. I have also very much appreciated the editorial contributions made by Roger Lee.

Note

1. This paper was originally delivered as the Progress in Human Geography lecture at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in Belfast (January 2002).

References


Driver, F. 1991: Morality, politics, geography: brave new worlds. In Philo, C., editor, New words new worlds: reconceptualising social and
cultural geography, St David’s University College, Lampeter.


