Critical Dialogue

A Darkling Plain. Stories of Conflict and Humanity during War. By Kristen Renwick Monroe, with Chloe Lampros-Monroe and Jonah Robnett Pellecchia. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
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— Simona Forti, *Università del Piemonte Orientale*

Allow me a confession, before I dive into my review. In my work on evil and power (*New Demons. Rethinking Power and Evil Today*, 2015) I acknowledge that social psychology, before philosophy, managed to avoid an excessively dualistic interpretation of political evil, which locked it away as an "absolute other." More pressured by facts than philosophy, social psychology has also provided much needed empirical evidence, shedding light on those "crimes of obedience" at the core of Arendt's "banality of evil." Looking for insights into the mind of the perpetrators of evil, the famous studies by Milgram and Zimbardo came to the striking conclusion that perfectly ordinary people were capable of committing extraordinarily evil deeds. In the wake of these studies, other social psychologists have blurred the lines between absolute demons and innocent victims, making space for a gray area populated with more mediocre demons, not-so-innocent bystanders, and more complex portrayals of victims.

Yet, no matter how open I have been to the discipline, I am still left with some diffidence. This is in no small part due to the fact that I do not know it in depth, and that - as a philosopher - I am not conversant with its methods. I am always on the lookout for data without a deep hermeneutic re-elaboration, or data that do little but confirm the researcher's initial hypothesis.

The work of Kristen Renwick Monroe, which unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to read earlier while writing my book, has in many ways disconfirmed my prejudices. While in Milgram's and Zimbardo's works we find ourselves in the closed and stuffy environment of the laboratory, where - I believe - the subjects' answers are affected by the artifice, in Monroe's interviews we can feel the contradictions and ambivalence of life. The narration attempts to recreate real experience, whereas the social laboratory strives to strip it off. Moreover, her sensibility and sensitivity in interpreting the interviews staves off the analytical coldness that often afflicts some empirical work in the social sciences.

In her important 2012 book, *Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide,* which constitutes the necessary theoretical companion to the book under review, Monroe explicitly situates herself within a scholarly tradition that appreciates the messiness of the human experience. There, she writes that actions "emanate not so much from conscious choice but rather from deep-seated instincts, predispositions, and habitual patterns of behavior that are related to our central identity. These spring from diverse forces, such as genetic predispositions, social roles, or culturally inculcated norms. Culture provides a range of self-images, but actors gravitate around the image that strikes a chord with their genetic propensities, with a powerful filter coming from situational or contextual factors" (p. 707 e-book version).

In that insightful and thorough book, Monroe devotes most of her attention to perpetrators of the Nazi genocide and the literature surrounding them. In *A Darkling Plain*, on the other hand, she turns to the survivors and expands her scope beyond Nazi Germany. The book is less interested in further developing Monroe's theoretical assumptions than in engaging the reader with the stories of her subjects, who mostly retain their "humanity" through deeply traumatic experiences. These experiences range widely in their historical and geographical context: We go from World War II, to the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, to the Pol Pot regime, to the Armenian genocide. Monroe chooses to divide her interviews in three different sections: The first collects a variety of traumatic experiences attached to World War II; the second is entitled "Other Voices, Other Wars: From Indochina to Iraq;" the third covers civil wars, genocide, and dictators. I was not utterly persuaded by this architecture. The first categorization is convincing in that it covers victimhood from many perspectives under the umbrella of the war: We have the story of a veteran from the South Pacific, the tale of the child of an SS father escaping Germany after the war, we hear from a young girl interned in a U.S. camp for Japanese Americans, and from one of the conspirators who plotted Hitler's assassination.

In the other sections, such coherence falters—it is not fully clear, for example, why the Khmer Rouge regime is categorized under wars rather than civil wars and dictatorship. On the other hand, the most interesting interviews come in fact from these last two sections.

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Here, we find Sara and Kimberly, and the tale of their experiences under Pol Pot. One is compelled to compare their different reactions to this same event. Sara cannot escape the rage caging her. The wound of what she has endured and what she has lost cannot heal, and the only passion inhabiting her is the quest for revenge. This prevents her from making sense of the past, but also from opening to the world and to the relationships of her present. She obsessively remembers all the privileges she enjoyed before, and was forced to give up. Kimberly follows a different path in one of the most significant interviews. She holds a precious ability to elaborate her experience and recount it. She takes us through a journey inside the dark dynamics of the mind, when it finds itself constrained by almost total domination: the crumbling of relationships of trust and solidarity; isolation; the loss of any past identity, even a sexual one; the inability to think; the impossibility to project. All that is left is a sort of elementary and mechanical behavior, focused on nothing but immediate strategies for survival. Yet, something "rescues" Kimberly's subjectivity from a nihilistic outcome: Despite everything that a "totalitarian re-education" seeks to destroy and imbue into its victims, this young Cambodian woman manages to nurture the root of the emotional and relational identity which had formed her. In particular, she secures (during fleeting meetings with her father) confirmation of her pre-totalitarian "who," as Arendt would put it. A "who" who was the object and subject of love connections, and for this reason manages to elaborate her trauma and gather from it the empathic force for re-engendering cooperation and strong communal connections, as Monroe's interpretation seems to run. In sum, Kimberly seems to present herself as the most successful example of someone who, despite the wounds of history, keeps her humanity intact. This expression returns frequently in the questions to the interviewees: "How did you keep your humanity when you saw all the killings. . .?"

I understand the general meaning of the term, but why does such a sensitive and cautious social scientist, as Monroe has proven herself to be in her works, use such a slippery term? The author is aware of the polysemy of the word and the concept. In the chapter she devotes to the categorization of the psychological mechanisms that recur in the interviewees' statements, Monroe declares the multiplicity of the meanings of humanity. Yet her conclusions do not seem to me wholly convincing. Humanity is in the end too generically equated to well-being and to a satisfactory emotional life.

I certainly do not want to enter the sophistications of the never ending philosophical debate around what it means to be human. But I believe that different locutions would have been more fitting and precise. Because deep down what the author is interrogating is not the humanity or inhumanity of the agents she encounters. Because denial, indifference, egoism, cruelty and evil, too, are part of humanity. I think that what is at stake here is the question of the conditions of possibility for ethical subjectivity. In other words, the question of which posture, which ethos a (let's say) normal subject adopts with respect to her own self, others, and the world in the face of a rupture, of personal and historical trauma.

There are many interesting testimonies to this: from the one by Rose, an old woman keeping the memory of the Armenian genocide, to that of Fabiola's, who leaves Nicaragua when the Sandinistas seize power; from the story of Marie, who manages to escape Lebanon during the civil war, but cannot forgive and asks only to forget, to the one of Okello who, having survived the Uganda of Idi Amin, thanks to the communitarian orientation in which he grew up finds his way back to courage and trust in sharing; from the story of Reza, who lives through the dark period of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, to that of Leyla, the Iranian college teacher who stands up against the ayatollah's guidelines on education, and risks her life to hide students in her home. And another comparison between two different ways to react to a same event, the second Iraq war, proves particularly illuminating. Doc, who was a military corpsman during the war, has no regrets for what he has done in the six months he spent in Iraq. If he has killed innocent civilians, he did it because such is war—an undertaking which cannot help collateral damage. He is, and remains, a soldier in any circumstance. Even in his leisurely time he keeps the tension of war awake. The videogames he plays constantly are not mere evasion, but rather a training for his military role. Hence the absence of guilty feelings, regrets, ambivalence, and contradictions. Executing orders, even orders to kill beyond military objectives, is in any case for him the most rational and righteous strategy. Sebastian, on the other hand, offers a rather different narration: His identity as a soldier crumbles in the face of the racism and cynicism of many of his colleagues. That he exposes himself to denounce the abuses of his fellow soldiers, that he succeeds in feeling pity, in keeping in touch with the pain of the victims, strengthens his personality in an altruistic direction.

Kristen Monroe's perspective is unquestionably a precious contribution to research in social and political psychology devoted to outline the so called "*Altruistic Personality.*" A crucial element of this personality is the formation of an open identity, educated to a specific idea of self, not as an autonomous entity, but as the result of meaningful relationships—a personality which in some cases can risk its survival to heal someone else's wounds. Monroe attributes greater weight to the emotional side in the formation of this identity. For her it is crucial whether this identity succeeds in opening itself to a "transformative encounter," an emotional encounter with the suffering of others, which brings the subject to suspend ordinary moral codes. There is no doubt that this emotional capacity is

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a crucial factor in determining an agent's conduct. And certainly the possibility of being struck by the pain in the face of the Other, as Levinas would put it, has to do with the most meaningful experiences shaping our identity as ethical identities. But how many identities do these agents have, or come to have?

In the concluding pages of her work, where she recapitulates the criteria guiding her research, Monroe seems to consider identity as a substratum which, though touched and modified by events and encounters, *remains one*. Moreover, identity seems to gather its value and strength precisely in this capacity to be one and univocal. On the other hand, I believe that many of the persons interviewed put in front of us a different, and philosophically interesting, reality. If Doc does not let himself be touched by the shocking force of the reality of war, is it not because in reality he is entirely possessed by only one identity? That Sara remains imprisoned in anger, is it not due to an identity structuring itself *exclusively* on the sum of what she owns? That Kimberly, Leyla, or Sebastian instead manage to open themselves to the world with generosity, doesn't it depend on the impossibility for them to adhere to one exclusive identity? In other words, isn't it the play of the making and unmaking of an identity, the continuous *agon* between one identity and the other, between identification and dis-identification, that "saves" us from closure within our own selves?

Response to Simona Forti's Review of *A Darkling Plain. Stories of Conflict and Humanity during War*

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— Kristen Monroe

My thanks to Professor Forti for her extremely thoughtful review, and to Jeff Isaac for establishing this Critical Dialogue. Forti's many interesting points deserve a full response; unfortunately, I can reply here to only two key points.

First, Forti suggests interviews can capture the messiness of life that too often eludes us in experiments. I agree. Naturalistic research projects also are often messy, but I advocate making the best of any extraordinary data set you are lucky enough to find. This book grew (unintended) out of a class project, in which I wanted students—fortunate enough to live in a country that has not fought a war on its soil since 1865–to learn first-hand what it would be like to experience such trauma. I casually, and without realizing the Pandora's Box I was opening, assigned students a final project in which they were to interview someone who had lived through a war or genocide. I never dreamed my students would conduct such amazing interviews. When I realized the treasure trove of material they produced, I asked the class if anyone wanted to work on it with me, hoping to involve them in the pleasures of academic of research. To my delight, several students responded; one student was not even in the class, just an Armenian who had heard we were talking about this historic genocide and wanted to hear about it first-hand.

As we began working on the book, we quickly realized we had not specified what we meant by humanity when we conducted interviews. This lack of conceptual clarity is clearly a weakness if we think of this as a well-thought-out-pre-designed research project. However, we decided to use it as an opportunity to try to understand what the speakers might have meant by "keeping their humanity." So Forti is correct: the key concept was not clearly specified, and we are exploring this in future work, which focuses on people who live with on-going political trauma, in this case the never-ending conflict in the Middle East. In this research we will be asking more explicitly what it means to the speakers to keep or reclaim their humanity.

Second, Forti asks about identity and the extent to which it is "the play of the making and unmaking of an identity. . . between identification and dis-identification, that "saves" us from closure within our own selves?" Like the term humanity, identity is also a complex concept that justifies fuller conversation. But, essentially, I would argue that identity is multi-faceted and that it is the situation that evokes and draws forth one particular aspect of identity versus another. It is the multi-dimensional aspect of identity that gives complex human beings the opportunity to choose how we remember events. It is what allows someone like Sara to revisit her memories, choosing sometimes to remember an event with bitterness and at other times to recall it in a way that allows for forgiveness, or at least a closure that opens the possibility of finding peace with our own future as we move beyond the trauma of war.

New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today.

By Simona Forti. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2014. 416p. $29.95

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— Kristen Monroe, *University of California—Irvine*

How do we conduct scholarly inquiry on events that lie so far beyond the ordinary that we lack the language with which to discuss them adequately? This issue confronts scholars analyzing events such as the Holocaust or wars in which the human suffering and barbarism lie so far outside the realm of everyday morality that the very concept of moral choices seems to exist on a different plane, one long relinquished by civilized human beings. Such is the task addressed by Simona Forti in *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today.* In responding to this challenge, Forti tackles an even greater challenge, however: attempting to explain evil as it relates to power today and illuminate it within the context of post-modern continental philosophy.

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Forti's post-modern perspective is one in which absolute values and general laws of social science give way to a historicist perspective. This intellectual framework exposes Forti to immediate problems. What guideposts can we use to direct ethical behavior in a world in which judgment no longer makes sense? Forti's concern is human suffering and her goal in *New Demons* is "to examine the relationship between evil and power, focusing on the political repercussions of . . . different philosophical presuppositions" (p 3). Forti's consideration of evil in modern political theory begins with Kant and moves quickly through Schelling and Heidegger to Nietzsche. Forti briefly visits Levinas, Freud and Lacan before settling on what she refers to as the Dostoevsky paradigm (Chapter 1). This paradigm posits a dualistic vision of helpless victims at the mercy of an omnipotent power, often the State. Forti finds this dualistic Dostoevskyian paradigm useful in revealing insights on evil not found in the Kantian approach. Indeed, Forti criticizes the Kantians for producing a paradigm insufficient for understanding evil today, when the structures of power have been transformed, leaving us instead to deal with evil that results from the passive attitude toward rule-following, a desire for obedience and the search for normalcy. Finding this a critical problem for contemporary democracies, Forti argues that the challenge for political philosophy is to disassemble this "demonological vision of power," in which we think of wicked demons versus absolute victims and instead adopt an analytical model that does not attribute evil "exclusively to the desire for and will to death" (6). Forti credits Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault with shifting philosophical focus from thinking in terms of "the power of putting to death" to one that instead emphasizes "strategies for maximizing life" (6).

As Forti rethinks the relationship between evil and power, she turns toward genocide, raising questions about the "process of dehumanization and [the] desubjectification of the . . . victim" (7) that accompanies genocide. Forti's complex theoretical critique of philosophical thought about victim and perpetrator concludes that we need a different way of thinking about the "Hendiadys of evil and power" (8). Forti proposes to offer a new paradigm: one of "mediocre demons or the normalcy of evi," a term that signifies her obvious, and acknowledged, debt to Arendt. (Indeed, one of Forti's stated aims is to complete Arendt's *The Life of the Mind,* in which Arendt connects evil to an absence of judgment and to conformity.)

While Forti finds Arendt's legacy in social psychology, Forti dubs these approaches limited from a philosophical point of view, critiquing especially approaches that find evil the result of an authoritarian context rather than an innate disposition. Her own approach argues for moving beyond theories emphasizing the "exclusive role of the will to and desire for death and instead viewing the scenes of evil as powerfully inhabited by the will to life, as the result of an attempt to maximize life itself" (9). In developing what she presents as a "geneaology of mediocre demons" (9) Forti focuses on Nietzschean thought, and its critiques of passivity, conformism and democracy, and in which the will to life plays an "extremely ambivalent role" (9). Her analysis of Nietzsche and Christianity links subjectivity and power; this approach is further pursued by Forti's discussion of Foucault and the possibility of locating political evil as the highest point of subjective dependency, all of which focuses the reader on "those 'states of domination' that suppressed the play or the movement between freedom and power" (10). Forti draws on Foucault's work on governmentality, pastoral power and the "care of the self" to develop her theory of mediocre devils. She intends her theory to reconstruct theoretical ties between Foucault and the philosophy of dissent in Eastern Europe.

More a way of thinking than a theory as classically defined, Forti's claims suggest we cannot discuss evil without at the same time considering the tenacious human desire to stay alive at all costs. (Indeed, one of her claims seems to be that evil results from the desire of ordinary people to stay alive, hence the centrality bystanders in allowing the evils of wars and genocides.) Her thoughts on the evil of docility (Chapter 6) and of strategies of obedience (Chapter 7) and how both these tendencies interact with, and harm, freedom, will resonate with followers of Arendt and Nietzsche, as well as with analysts of the horrors of war and the Holocaust. Her discussion of *Parrhesia* (Chapter 8)—speaking truth boldly—and the section on caring for the self—by which Forti means caring for the soul—relates the practices of dissidence in Europe to the general philosophical themes developed so carefully throughout the earlier sections of the book. In her conclusion, Forti analyzes the work of Primo Levi to suggest that the fear of death must relate closely to the way we value both life and ourselves as human beings.

While Forti's work explicitly rejects the approach of contemporary Anglo-American political theory, with its heavily Kantian ratiocination, Forti does not discuss her work's relation to analyses of evil that emanate from contemporary empirical political theory, an approach drawing on the methods and assumptions of post-behavioral social science. These differences in foundational assumptions carry critical consequences for the substantive findings. For example, analysts using a more empirical approach to understanding evil might ask how actual people make moral choices in difficult political/ethical situations. They might quiz people—both ordinary citizens caught up in genocide or decision-makers setting policies—directly about the claims made by Forti, trying thus to test her arguments that when structures of power are transformed a major form of evil results from the populace's passive attitude toward rule-following, its

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desire for obedience and a putative search for normalcy. Such an approach could provide a bridge between Forti's work and the more wide-spread approach to evil found in the traditional Kantian approach to moral choice Forti rejects. I suspect the response by readers to Forti's claims will be closely related to the reader's own position concerning Kantian ethics versus the post-modern/continental philosophical tradition that drives Forti's analysis.

What is more interesting, however, is Forti's failure to address a virtue-ethics approach to evil. Emanating in the Greek emphasis on human flourishing, the origin of virtue ethics traces back to Plato's discussion of the human virtues and Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. Virtue ethics resonated with Roman ethicists (Livy, Plutarch, Tacitus and Cicero) and that of Christian scholars (St. Ambrose and St. Thomas Aquinas) but fell into disuse after the Renaissance. It enjoyed a resurgence only in the mid-20th century, with G. E. M. Anscombe's work and continuing today with scholars like Martha Nussbaum, Phillipa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre and the late Bernard Williams.

Virtue ethics seem directly relevant given Forti's interest in the role of individual character, especially the virtues our characters exert in both influencing and assessing ethical behavior. This is immediately evident if we contrast a virtue ethics approach with the other two dominant approaches to normative ethics: (1) the deontological emphasis on duty and rules and (2) consequentialism's stressing the outcome of the act itself to derive its rightness or wrongness. For example, a consequentialist approach would find lying morally wrong because of the negative consequences lying produces. In contrast, a deontological perspective would find lying *always* wrong, even if some potential "good" might ensue. A virtue ethics approach focuses us less on lying in any particular instance and would rather ask us to consider what a decision to lie discloses about our character and moral behavior. This general illustration suggests how powerfully the particular approach followed can impact the substance of the analysis produced.

A more specific illustration of how a virtue ethics approach might inform Forti's concern with the individual, and the role an individual's passivity in the face of evil, comes when we consider Forti's emphasis on bystanders, a group Forti makes critical to the existence of contemporary evil. Forti suggests bystanders' desire to live causes them to look away, to avoid becoming involved and thus allows the evil to continue. (Forti never explains how this desire to live differs significantly from a desire to avoid death.) A virtue ethics approach might advance this explanation, by noting how bystanders' failure to help is the result of their own self-perceptions. (Indeed, I find bystanders describe themselves as people who lack agency, are weak, not able to help others.) The critical point here is that if we emphasize character in our analysis, then we can see how character limits and determines our moral choices. This produces a quite different explanation for moral choice that the one Forti offers.

Forti does not speak directly of moral choice but that idea runs as a kind of chorus backing up her main argument. Had Forti explored the role of character more fully, she might have concluded that bystanders—indeed, all participants in the Holocaust, for example—speak in the language of character and not in the language of agonistic and deliberative choice found in Kant. But this rejection of Kant does not necessarily land us in a world without ethical guideposts. A virtue ethicist—or even a moral sense theorist—could confront the same issues as those that drive Forti's work and yet arrive at quite different explanations. The choice of theoretical lens through which political and ethical reality are analyzed will produce dramatically different substantive analyses.

Response to Kristen Monroe's Review of *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today*

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— Simona Forti

When an author throws her book out into the public, she loses exclusive control over its meaning. It is always interesting, if sometimes disorienting, to come across new and unexpected interpretations of one's work. Indeed, I was disorienting reading Professor Monroe's review of my work, particularly because she attributes to me a task I did not intend to pursue, and then faults me for not achieving it.

Let me clarify what my task was not. I did not set out to write a chapter in normative philosophy, to instruct people on how to act in pursuit of virtue and the good. Even less did I intend to provide empirical data on the kind of people who are likely to engage in evil actions.

Rather, the book is an intervention into debates in *critical* philosophy. On one hand, I criticize traditional approaches to the problem of evil, approaches that see it as —from Kant on—an extraordinary act of transgression. On the other hand, I intended to challenge some strands within post-foundationalism (I deliberately use this term instead of what I believe to be a trite, superficial, and outdated category such as "postmodern") that suggest that talking about evil only made sense in the world of theology and metaphysics, which they want to transcend. Although I share the premises of critical and deconstructive thought, I also believe that evil still presents itself to us as something that forces us to some form of judgment, even when we think we have left it behind.

How are we to think of evil today? In order to answer this question, I undertake a genealogical reconstruction—which sharply differs from a historicist approach striving for a contextual rationalization. I work through several philosophical stances on evil to show how, despite their

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ostensible differences, they all fit into what I call the "Dostoevsky paradigm." From Schelling to Heidegger, from certain readings of Nietzsche and Freud to Lacan, a view always emerges of evil as simply a transgression of the law for the sake of destruction. The political translation of this frame entails a radically dualistic landscape where the perpetrators are driven by a will to power and the victims are completely passive and powerless. Drawing on work on biopolitics, whose invention Professor Monroe generously but unfairly attributes to me, and specifically the work of Foucault, I put the hegemony of this paradigm into question. If we assume that evil is not a substance, an essence, but still is a set of actions (of which genocide constitutes the most striking example), how are we to confront it in judgment? Do we confront it simply as the product of a will to death, repeating the age-old binary life/good, death/evil? Or is it possible that the will to life itself can paradoxically become the bearer of evil?

Both these somewhat Foucauldian questions and Hannah Arendt's reflections on the banality of evil, I argue, point us beyond the Dostoevsky paradigm. But in those reflections, Arendt fails to render explicit the connection between Eichmann's mindless rule-following and the emergence of an obedient subjectivity in relation to power. I bring Nietzsche's and Foucault's critique of pastoral power, as well as Primo Levi's reflections on the "gray zone," to bear on this gap. The genealogy of this subjectivity discloses, I suggest, an alternative and complementary paradigm, which we might call of "mediocre" demons, who do not pursue a will to destruction, but a will to life bringing them to thoughtlessly comply with hegemonic norms.

This reconstruction of my argument, though rough itself, bears little resemblance to the one put forth by Professor Monroe. Indeed, I hardly recognized myself in her words, hence my disorientation. It seems to me that Monroe simply wanted me to write a different book: either one on neo-Aristotelian ethics, or one on social psychology. Unfortunately, that is not where my interests, my competences, or my passion lie.

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