



# After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights (Columbia Studies in Political Thought/Political History)

By Robert Meister

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The way in which mainstream human rights discourse speaks of such evils as the Holocaust, slavery, or apartheid puts them solidly in the past. Its elaborate techniques of "transitional" justice encourage future generations to move forward by creating a false assumption of closure, enabling those who are guilty to elude responsibility. This approach to history, common to late-twentieth-century humanitarianism, doesn't presuppose that evil ends when justice begins. Rather, it assumes that a time *before* justice is the moment to put evil in the past.

Merging examples from literature and history, Robert Meister confronts the problem of closure and the resolution of historical injustice. He boldly challenges the empty moral logic of "never again" or the theoretical reduction of evil to a cycle of violence and counterviolence, broken only once evil is remembered for what it *was*. Meister criticizes such methods for their deferral of justice and susceptibility to exploitation and elaborates the flawed moral logic of "never again" in relation to Auschwitz and its evolution into a twenty-first-century doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"*After Evil* is a large, even magisterial book. . . This ambitious and persuasive book charts human rights as an ethical philosophy, a symbolic relation between subjects, and a pervasive ideology of our own relationship to history."

--Daniel Worden, *Postmodern Culture*

The conclusion that Meister drives home is that human rights as they are understood today reconcile us to the given rather than offering grander visions of justice.

--Joe Hoover, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*

Meister's counterhegemonic deconstruction of the ostensible apolitical post-Cold War discourse of human rights to its roots in the conservative interests of global liberal capitalism is sure to resonate with any critical social theorist.

-- Milan Babík, *Political Theory*

Especially rich in exploring the psychological and religious dimensions of human rights practices and discourses, and in listening to those voices, including Islamist ones, that are currently viewed as opposed to human rights, thus helping to render them intelligible.

(*Choice*)

Original, subtle, and provocative.

(Debra L. Delaet *ID: International Dialogue*)

*After Evil* is a large, even magisterial book.... [It] aims to document human rights discourse... as an ideology that transcends any particular instance and operates as a symbolic logic, governing not just international law but our own emotional lives.... This ambitious and persuasive book charts human rights as an ethical philosophy, a symbolic relation between subjects, and a pervasive ideology of our own relationship to history.

(Daniel Worden *Postmodern Culture*)

Robert Meister's central idea is that human rights since the end of the Second World War have provided a limited and problematic response to the phenomenon of political evil?particularly slavery, colonialism, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.... The conclusion that Meister drives home is that human rights as they are understood today reconcile us to the given rather than offering grander visions of justice.... Human rights as we know them today are explicitly intended to limit the promise of justice?both because the horrors of the twentieth century suggest that such promise might come at too high a cost, and because the promise of justice as greater political and social equality is opposed by the post-Cold War powers.

(Joe Hoover *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*)

Thoughtful and thought-provoking.

(Claudia Card *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*)

[*After Evil*] contains many brilliant, perceptive and thought provoking insights.

(*Survival*)

## Review

The rare work of a genuine thinker, one who permits no phenomenon, discourse, event, or category of analysis to be assumed or left uninterrogated. *After Evil* also offers a supremely important and timely argument, one that cuts to the quick of bids for justice in the aftermath of extreme orders of domination, exploitation, and extermination.

(Wendy Brown, University of California, Berkeley)

## About the Author

Robert Meister is professor of social and political thought at the University of California, Santa Cruz. An active participant in California higher education politics, he is director of the Bruce Initiative on Rethinking Capitalism at UCSC and the author of *Political Identity: Thinking Through Marx*.

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