YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY
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Why Grow Up?: Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age
Susan Neiman
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The desire to submit to the constraints of established authority at the very same time that we long to break loose of them seems to me a fair account of one of the major miseries of the human condition. It is not the particulars that hurt, so much as the fact of inherent self-division—the Sisyphean nature of its repetitions.

For most of our lives we embrace the infantile comfort of living inside conventions of thought and behavior given us at birth. Then, periodically, these conventions come to feel confining, even imprisoning, and, as though awakening from a deep sleep, we erupt in an explosive longing for the freedom to define ourselves anew. What follows then is anything from cultural unrest to flat-out revolution—governments may fall, institutions crumble, new equalities assert themselves—but the constitution of the human psyche does not undergo any material change; inevitably, the cycle of submission and rebellion repeats itself, without much permanent progress having been made.

From Plato on, philosophers, educators, and analysts have supplied one version or another of the relation between culture and nature as the key explanation for our ongoing dilemma. The ancients suggested that the gods had originally made human beings with four legs, four arms, and two faces each, but Zeus, fearing that too much power was invested in this creature, split each person in two, forcing men and women to spend their lives searching for the lost half. Then the Bible offered this version of the problem: human beings were at one with themselves until they ate of the Tree of Knowledge, whereupon they evolved into animals endowed with consciousness—a gift and a punishment. On the one hand, consciousness made the race proud, on the other it made people lonely. The loneliness proved our undoing, so perverting our natural tendencies that we became strangers to ourselves—the true meaning of alienation—and could never again feel whole. After the Bible—I’m skipping a bit here—came Freud, who agreed that the loneliness of human-kind was inborn, the sense of disconnect permanent. For Freud, however, the disconnect was better accounted for by his theory of instinct drives, those elements inscribed in our very essence that put us into the kind of
conflict that only profound self knowledge could ameliorate. Interestingly enough, from Plato to Freud, all have agreed that help could come only from within. If men and women learned to occupy their own conscious selves, fully and freely, they would no longer be alone: they would have themselves for company. Once one had company one could achieve integration and risk fellowship.

FOR SUSAN NEIMAN, and the hundreds of moral philosophers (including Kant, Rousseau, and Nietzsche) who stand behind her, the word “integration” is best replaced by the word “maturity.” What the poets and the analysts describe as achieving wholeness, these philosophers describe as inhabiting adulthood. Neiman herself has written widely and often about the meaning and the promise of a life devoted to maturing. It is her mission to rescue the phrase “Grow up!” from irony and deliver it over to those who earnestly believe that growing up does not mean resigning oneself to the world as it is; rather, it means contributing materially to the making of a world as it ought to be. Philosophy, she tells us repeatedly, can supply a history of thought that will act as an invaluable aid in this endeavor.

As always, Immanuel Kant is Neiman’s guiding light, and it is with his model of coming of age that she begins Why Grow Up?, her new book-length meditation on the meaning and usefulness of maturing. For Kant, she tells us, the sine qua non of adulthood resides in the development of reason. In infancy we mindlessly believe whatever we are told, and in adolescence we just as mindlessly reject everything we are told. Finally we learn to think for ourselves and develop judgment, whereupon the ability to reason comes of age and we along with it. The catch is that learning to think for oneself is not a given; it is an ideal, one achieved only with immense effort. We resist making the effort as it involves damned hard work.

“We choose immaturity,” Neiman writes, channeling Kant, “because we are lazy and scared: how much more comfortable it is to let someone else make your decisions.” Thus, although born with the capacity to become grown-up persons of reason—and so possessed of true inner freedom—our own worst instincts insure that we will remain uninformed, unthinking creatures who would rather spend three weeks obsessing over which washing machine to buy than what to do about “oil companies, sexual harassment, drones, preventable disease.”

Every day we transgress against our own longing to act well.

Ultimately Neiman and Kant both remind the reader that the freedom of which they speak involves self-control, the sort of control that includes the will to take responsibility for one’s own actions. All of these philosophers agree that until humanity, individually and as a whole, develops the desire to take that responsibility, we go on living in a state of self-induced blindness that ends, inevitably and for each of us, with life coming to seem emptier and emptier the longer we live.

The question this book asks is: How does one grow a self endowed with a reasoning inner life that can deliver more rather than less nourishment of mind and spirit as we age? Unfortunately Neiman also feels obliged to answer that question—literally. It is then that we come face to face with the limited ability of the contemporary philosopher to correct for the anomie that lies in wait for the one who does not “grow up.”

Throughout the book Neiman itemizes the social disasters that our time and place have given rise to, implying that ours is one of the most heartless and soulless of worlds in human history, and thus the people in it have less chance than others did of ever truly coming of age. She uses philosophy “to show something about the conceptual horror of the world we have come to, in the hope that understanding the depth of its violation of our own natures will be of use in acting against it.” This agenda, however, leads her to prescriptiveness, and it is just here that the book comes a cropper.

In a chapter called “Becoming Adult” Neiman presents us—if only we, the scared and the lazy, would apply ourselves!—with a sure-fire recipe for maturing. Under the rubric of three sub-sections called “Education,” “Travel,” and “Work,” she delivers a mini-lecture on how each of these elements of the human enterprise fortify against mental and emotional arrest. Education, she informs us, should develop, not break, the inquiring spirit; teach respect for the canon; and urge a week off the Internet. Travel is to be encouraged so that one does not think one’s particular cultural assumptions are the ultimate picture of human reality. Work that is absorbing is to be pursued because it is purposeful engagement with something beyond ourselves that gives life its meaning.

The reader—grown up or otherwise—cannot help staring at the pages on which these homilies are inscribed. The sentiments are those of the world skeptical of human history, and thus the people in it have less chance than ours did of ever truly coming of age. They are prone to treat the ebb and flow of feelings as though our
passions were nothing but impediments to reason.” He also observed that “unlike moral rigorists such as Kant and Kierkegaard, Freud maintained that humans are born with psychological as well as physical limitations” and “prescribed calibrating our morals to our psychological abilities.”

All of which takes me back to the beginning of this review.

The Hebrew philosopher Hillel urged that we do unto others as we would have others do unto us. Kant urged, similarly, that we not make instrumental use of one another. With all the good will in the world—and remarkable numbers of people have it—we have not been able to make these noble recommendations carry the day. Not because we are lazy or venal or incompetent but because most of us live in a state of inner conflict that makes purity of behavior an impossibility. Every day of our lives we transgress against our own longing to act well: our tempers are ungovernable, our humiliations unforgettable, our fantasies ever present. We cannot stop ourselves from scorning, dismissing, challenging, and discounting. We spend years on the couch struggling to make our reasoning intelligence subdue our impassioned outbursts. When given a recipe for the good life, we want these realities on the ground incorporated in the mix.

Aside from that of our own permanently conflicted selves, another unchanging reality is that the world as it is has been decried since time immemorial. Throughout history women and men have been writing—letters, diaries, poems, and novels—claiming theirs the worst time ever. While many have been truly horrendous, not one is without some redeeming feature. The twentieth century can easily claim the distinction of having been one of the most murderous on record; at the same time it also created the greatest mass culture in history, and, for better and worse, extended a democratic sense of equal right to a sea of humanity that previously knew only obligation. Thus we are living in a time and place in which the lowest common denominator is the one that the culture honors. It is within that particular development—for which there is no blueprint—that our historically fractured selves struggle to remain or become human, as that term has ever been understood.

Neiman’s book is a pleasure to read because she writes well and thinks lucidly and because her values are invigorating. But, for once, I’d like to read a philosopher who speaks with understanding of the actual makeup of actual human beings on an actual ground and realizes that the unnuanced appeal to a centuries-old definition of moral reasoning often makes us feel even lonelier than we are.