

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Book Review

Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity, a Guide for Grown-up Idealists* (Harcourt, New York: 2008), ISBN 978-0-15-101197-1 (hardcover).

REVIEWED BY JEREMY BENDIK-KEYMER
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For Susan Neiman, there are two fundamental distinctions that structure the world: the distinction between *is* and *ought*, and the distinction between the innocent and the unjust. *Moral Clarity* is an attempt to develop a Kantian-inspired response to contemporary politics in America and to life in global capitalism that is shaped by these two distinctions. In the process, Neiman provides a rereading of Abraham—disabusing us of Kierkegaard's version—a defense of the Enlightenment, a reading of Odysseus as a modern hero, and a clear and helpful addition to virtue ethics: *focus on heroes*. She also revisits Job, whom she considers the first *Aufklärer* (Enlightenment man), and whom she discussed in her much read previous book, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, 2002). *Moral Clarity* weaves all of these figures into a critique of the Bush administration as evil, and a critique of contemporary culture as hopelessly cynical.

Neiman is a student of Stanley Cavell and John Rawls. She is something of a heroine herself. A high school drop-out who worked her way into Harvard for both undergraduate and graduate study, a single mother of three, she is currently director of the Einstein Forum in Berlin. The Einstein Forum is an interdisciplinary institute that brings together the best minds across both the arts and the sciences for symposia of both public and academic importance on cutting edge issues. It is the 21st century version of the 18th century newspapers where Kant, Moses Mendelssohn, and others published some of the most important essays of the Enlightenment. *Moral Clarity* is like just such an essay—more Rousseauian, even, in its deliberate provocation, than Kantian in tone, although Kantian in content.

Neiman's first book *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (Shocken, 1992) is part memoir, part political critique, written as Cavell would write if he applied *The Claim of Reason* to politics. Her second book was *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford, 1994), the redevelopment of her dissertation under Rawls. It explains Kant's oeuvre as a project of freedom, aimed at our growing-up. *Evil in Modern Thought: an Alternative History of Philosophy* explored how early modern philosophy was driven by the problem of evil, not by epistemology, and how the Enlightenment (particularly Rousseau) came to divorce natural disaster from moral evil, thereby making evil a matter entirely of our own making (or unmaking). The book ends with a discussion of the banality of evil—the current form of evil we have made. This third book was original, unlike anything Cavell or Rawls had ever done. *Moral Clarity* integrates all three previous books: commenting on culture, developing the claim of reason to a world that makes sense, and grappling with evil from an Enlightenment perspective. It is a contemporary *Guide for the Perplexed*, formed around the image of orientation Kant used to describe reason's idealism.

The book falls into three parts. The first examines how our culture and politics have become cynical. Whether you're a leftist or a conservative, a Foucaultian critic among ivory towers or a Hobbesian realist in the Bush administration, your common metaphysical assumption is that humans are unfree. Neiman's problem with this view harkens back to a key moment in Kant's "Third Antinomy" from the *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant reminds us we *cannot* know whether we

are free or not. That agnosticism, in turn, undergirds a more important moment for Kant: our consciences present us constantly with the awareness that we *could* decide in favor of what makes sense over what we are inclined to do (p. 80). In other words, we could be idealistic. Contemporary cynicism has not contemplated these facts about human beings, and so reduces us constantly—and so reduces life—to some form of materialistic determinism (by power, security, pleasure, status, you name it). Neiman, by pointing out the false certainty of these views, makes room for idealism: the possibility of acting for what we think makes sense. Interestingly, in this section, she also explains why Islamists and Bush alike contain a grain of truth: they assume our idealistic potential, although their moral senses are twisted.

Moral Clarity's second section defends the Enlightenment from late-Modern and post-modern critiques (e.g., Adorno's and Horkheimer's, Rorty's, Foucault's, Berlin's...) and recaptures an Enlightenment filled with emotion, ambivalence, reverence, awareness of limits, and irony. Most importantly, justice. Neiman examines four Enlightenment values: happiness, reason, reverence, and hope. These values are not comprehensive of a good life, but surround the task of living for the sake of what *ought* to be in light of what *is*. Our happiness must be found in striving, not settling. Reason must make demands on the world (it's "idea of the idea" is regulative (p. 140)). Reverence must follow the things we do not understand and yet which do *make* sense (e.g. death, which *makes* so much of human life have meaning). And hope must be assumed whenever we act, lest there be no point in doing as we should, lest there be, literally, "demoralization" (p. 276).

The final part of *Moral Clarity* makes the case for heroes. Neiman shows how her vision of the hero grapples with evil. Discussing heroes is important, because Neiman believes that situations dispose us to do evil (pp. 353-365). Thus, she comes very close to adopting the cynical picture she deflated earlier, since situations like Abu Ghraib imply a kind of determinism about our behavior. Neiman thinks that the guards there were set up to act viciously, building on the lessons of many psychological studies the U.S. military has taken to heart (pp. 340-361, *passim*).

All the more reason, then, to consider heroes. For beings like human beings who *cannot* close off their idealistic potential, we need heroes to remind everyone what is possible. "Heroes give us alternative to resignation. They show that the limits of life can be probed and extended, that we need not swallow every piece of the frameworks into which we are born" (p. 321). Heroes keep open idealism, showing that it—not cynicism—is metaphysically true. More importantly, they show us how to avoid being complicit in evil.

The distinction between *is* and *ought* leads us to make demands on the world. Things are not as they should be. They do not make sense. So let's remake the world. Neiman thinks that the most fundamental breakdown of sense occurs when the innocent suffer, or when the unjust flourish. Following Kant, she holds that being moral makes us worthy of happiness, and that reason demands a world where doing as we should results in happiness. The suffering of innocence is the anguish she finds in Job, and on her Kantian reading, we answer the anguish only by remaking the world, whether by technology or by politics.

Far worse, though, than not rewarding moral behavior is punishing it. When the innocent are persecuted, reason revolts the most. This is why, contra Kierkegaard, the Abraham at Moriah is not worth revering, while the Abraham at Sodom is. At Moriah, Abraham shut up and set to sacrifice his son, a *child!* At Sodom, Abraham took on God himself over the impending slaughter of inno-

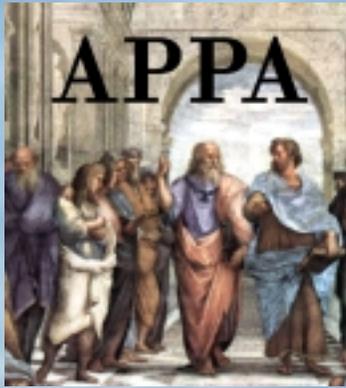
cents. He bargained God down until the one innocent family in Sodom could be saved. Reason's authority trumps God, not vice-versa.

So Neiman's examples in the last section of the book focus on heroes who side with the innocent. An Israeli professor who suffers to support Palestinians harassed by settlers, an organizer who risks her neck to bring economy back to Afghanistan on the terms of villagers, a high level security advisor who lost his job to reveal the American massacre of civilians in Vietnam, and a former student of Quine who created a depth response to civil rights: a way to teach the poor how to become mathematically adept. All use hard-won explanation of how the world makes sense to support those who least deserve to be run over or neglected by power. Like Odysseus, they keep struggling, and testing, and wending their ways through the ambivalence to make sense out of tangled life.

What I like most about this book is the way it speaks from our form of life. For instance, the United States of America was founded on the idea of human dignity, and the international order of human rights is, too. The world really does not make sense to us—think about it (don't rationalize!)—whenever human dignity is effaced. And it seems to me that our minds won't truly rest unless we make the world make sense. Neiman presents us with a set of virtues, and a vision of heroism, that do not give up on these core realities of who we are.

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

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