

Haunted by evil

by [William C. Placher](#) in the [Apr 05, 2003](#) issue

Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy. By Susan Neiman. Princeton University Press, 358 pp., \$29.95.

The puzzle is as old as belief in God: God is omnipotent. God is good. So why is there evil? But if you don't believe in God, doesn't "the problem of evil" go away? If no one created the world and no one is in charge of it, then the existence of evil is tragic, distressing, horrible—but not puzzling.

Susan Neiman's brilliant new book rejects this seemingly obvious conclusion. Neiman, a Harvard-trained philosopher who is now director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany, doesn't believe in God, but she still finds evil a puzzle. The goal of philosophy, indeed of human inquiry generally, is to make some sense of the world. But evil—especially appalling evil like the horrors we gather under the name "Auschwitz"—seems so obviously not to make sense that it poses the puzzle of evil in a new, secular form.

In reflecting on this problem Neiman fulfills the ambitious promise of her subtitle by radically reinterpreting the whole history of modern European philosophy. The standard version of that history centers on finding an absolutely certain starting point for thought. Empiricists like Locke, Berkeley, and Hume thought that knowledge begins with sense experience. Rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz insisted on starting with the self-evident truths of reason. Kant combined elements of both traditions in ways that began the new debates that dominated the 19th century.

Neiman, however, insists that the central issue of philosophy, beginning in the 17th century, has not been, "What can we know for sure?" but, "Can we make sense of evil?" One side of the debate, represented by Leibniz, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, holds that we can and must make the reality of evil comprehensible. The other side, represented by Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, Hume, the Marquis de Sade and Schopenhauer, denies that we can or should.

The argument is in large part ethical. To the first party, giving up on making sense of evil seems like conceding victory to evil, allowing it to destroy the meaning of the world. To the second party, explaining evil seems to make it seem rational, sensible and therefore not really so bad after all. Such a temptation must be resisted at all costs.

The puzzle still haunts us, Neiman believes:

Mention the problem of evil, and any group is likely to split. Some will confess to seeking reason in the world, while others are certain that such searches reveal childish weakness of which the others should be ashamed. The division doesn't reflect education or class background, and it seems impervious to national and religious differences. Still it's always as sharp as it is clear and passionate. For one group, the world is so thoroughly disenchanted that the absence of reason in it isn't worth mentioning. For the other that absence is the source of permanent frustration and pain.

So what are we to do? Neiman reviews how Nietzsche and Freud, in their different ways, tried to make the problem go away, and then considers five more recent thinkers who have reflected on it: Albert Camus, Hannah Arendt, the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and her own teacher, John Rawls. Arendt turns out to be the hero of the story. As Neiman wrote in an earlier essay, "Arendt will not accept a response to evil that would excuse or redeem it. And yet, she suggests, we cannot neglect the project Kant undertakes in lieu of theodicy: asking whether human beings fit into the world in the face of the evil within it. Arendt seeks to show us that we do by seeking a way to find our place in the world without making us too comfortable in it."

In her controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt found Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi mass murderer on trial for his life, to be not a monster on the grand scale but a rather dull, ordinary man distinguished principally by lack of imagination and an unusually intense dedication to the advancement of his own career--the very embodiment of "the banality of evil." Her critics accused her of making excuses for Eichmann, but that wasn't the point. A great monster is always just a few steps away from being a hero—John Milton's Satan is the most famous example. Arendt wanted to deny Eichmann any glamour.

She also wanted to remind her readers that evil usually seduces us through small temptations. The chance to torture someone to death would not tempt us, but we might, like Eichmann, be willing first simply to advance our careers by making trains run more efficiently without asking questions about the fate of their human cargoes, and then eventually, many small steps down the road, figure out how to make the process of murdering those human cargoes more efficient too.

The good news in Arendt's often horrifying book is that while evil always remains mysterious—we should not try to make Eichmann's actions seem reasonable—even in its worst forms it is not the product of demonic forces utterly beyond our control. If horrendous evil begins in minor temptations, then we can learn to resist such temptations. If the worst villains are boringly ordinary, they are within our capacity to fight. Therefore, Neiman concludes, we have something "less than justification and . . . more than hope." We should resist trying to make sense of evil, if that means denying its irreducible, irrational horror. But we should not let the presence of evil prevent us from making enough sense of the world to allow us to feel at home in it and get on with trying to make it better.

No summary can convey the intellectual firepower of Neiman's book. Within her field of interest, she seems not only to have read everything but to have understood it at the deepest level. Nearly every paragraph contains at least one epigrammatically quotable sentence. One probably needs to have taken at least a good undergraduate course in modern philosophy to be able to follow the story all the time. For those so equipped few recent books will bring so much sheer intellectual pleasure.

Yet a Christian theologian can't help regretting the absence of any reference to Christian theology (a few Jewish religious thinkers do get mentioned in passing). I don't know if Neiman has looked at theologians and found us all trivial, or just hasn't looked, but at any rate she does not take into account the contributions theology might have made to the discussion.

I must also confess that I approached the book's end with increasing apprehension. In a good murder mystery the crime may not be solved until the very last page. But when a work of philosophy keeps summarizing yet another important text as the book draws nearer and nearer to its conclusion, we are justified in fearing that the author's summary of her own position is going to be a bit skimpy. And it is.

For those who don't believe in God, the question is, "How can we make sense of a world that includes evil without making evil seem sensible?" When atheists tell believers that the reality of evil refutes their belief, believers can now answer by quoting Susan Neiman to the effect that atheists are, if not in the same boat, at least in a very similar one. But this is only small comfort.

It's interesting that Neiman keeps coming back to Arendt, the only one of the 20th-century authors she discusses who retained faith in God. Does the way out of even the secular version of the problem of evil inevitably lead back to theology after all? That would be too strong a claim. Yet I was struck by how much Neiman's conclusions have in common with those of many theologians. First, both Neiman and a long tradition in Christian theology emphasize the irrationality of evil. Aquinas said that evil has neither a formal nor a final cause—it lacks both ordering principle and ultimate purpose. It doesn't make sense, as Neiman keeps insisting, or it wouldn't be so evil.

Second, even when they maintain that God can always bring good out of evil most Christian theologians would agree with Neiman that we should be very cautious in offering anything like explanations of how evil fits into a rational picture of the world. It's a lesson Neiman learned from Kant by way of Arendt: the world of our experience finally doesn't make sense. We deny the evil of its horrors if we pretend that it does. The solutions to the problem of evil thus lie, if anywhere, in realms beyond the reach of our experience. We can apprehend them, if at all, only through faith and hope, not through understanding or proof. Luther made that point against what he called "philosophy," and Kierkegaard made it against Hegel.

Third, Neiman recognizes the unfairness of Freud's claim that all religion begins in an infantile desire to be protected. At least as early as the Book of Job, after all, religious folk were acknowledging that God didn't always keep them from getting hurt. Job and those who follow him in Judaism and Christianity find ways to consent to God's sovereignty without guaranteeing even God's chosen an easy ride through life. It's what Paul Ricoeur calls "the demythicization of consolation"—consolation that doesn't buy into the myth that nothing bad ever happens to good people. Though she doesn't discuss such theological themes, Neiman seems at least open to thinking about them.

Finally, for both Neiman and Christians any morally adequate account of evil must call us to do something about it. Neiman argues that Rousseau's great innovation

was to identify the source of evil in bad social organization and therefore think that better social organization could fix it. Neither Neiman nor most Christian theologians are that optimistic. Still, it will not do simply to accept evil passively. For Neiman, one of the virtues of both Arendt and Rawls is that they offer strategies for opposing evil. So in the Christian tradition, from the Sermon on the Mount to the latest liberation theology, there is a consistent theme: that we live in a world where evil will not have the last word, and that this has implications for how we ought to live.

Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* is an example of the ignorance of or indifference to theology among many contemporary philosophers. In his wonderful book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Michael Buckley makes the point that almost none of the modern philosophical discussions about God specifically considered the Triune God of Christian faith. The debates were about ancient philosophical concepts of God, pretty much as if Christianity had never happened. This had the effect of defining God as an omnipotent creator and, particularly in the face of the problem of evil, that has the effect of making God look like a bully. It's easy to dismiss a God like that, yet that's the God contemporary philosophers discuss.

But Christianity—in the New Testament, in Luther, in Barth, Bonhoeffer, Balthasar, Moltmann, and elsewhere—presents a God first and foremost defined by love rather than by power. God is not one omnipotent Lord but a Triune community of mutually loving persons, known best in the Jesus who died on the cross. W. H. Vanstone's great hymn captures the image of such a God: "Thou art God; no monarch Thou / Thron'd in easy state to reign; / Thou art God, Whose arms of love/Aching, spent, the world sustain." A God who sustains the world from the cross has a very different relation to the problem of evil than an omnipotent Lord observing the world from a distance. I wish Neiman had reflected on the contribution that trinitarian theology could make to thinking about evil.