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## The Big E

by Mark Lilla

In the summer of 410 the Goths streamed into the city of Rome and sacked it for three days. According to modern historians, this event was not nearly as significant as once thought, given that the center of the Empire had already moved east and the barbarians had been chipping away at its territories and infiltrating its administrative apparatus for some time. Rome did not "fall" in 410, or so it now seems to us.



"Thou wast Perfect till Iniquity was found in Thee"  
William Blake, Satan in his Original Glory, circa 1805

To contemporary observers, though, the sack of the city was a disaster of the highest order. We have only to read the first book of Saint Augustine's *City of God*, which was written during the two decades following the event, to relive the profound spiritual dislocation caused by the sufferings of Christians who were there. As bishop of Hippo in North Africa, Augustine was besieged by believers' reports of torture, famine, enslavement, rape, and murder, and by their recurring question: Why? Why does God permit us to suffer rather than routing our enemies or bringing about the apocalypse that would reestablish his divine justice? In responding to these cries Augustine knew he could count on two things in his readers' minds -- a sense of human sinfulness and belief in the afterlife -- both of which he used to bring them comfort. How do we know, he asked, that all those who suffered were pure of heart, even if they professed Christianity? And even if some of the sufferers were indeed innocent, God's providence works in mysterious ways; we can be sure that, at least in the hereafter, all will be made right. In the words of Saint Paul, "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

In November 1755 the city of Lisbon, one of the loveliest ports in

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Europe, was leveled by a tremendous earthquake followed by fires and tidal waves that killed untold numbers. The reaction across the continent was swift and, to some, reminiscent of the atmosphere surrounding the sack of Rome. Churches were packed with ordinary parishioners hoping to have their fears relieved, and they heard sermons that echoed Augustine's mixed message of guilt and hope. But educated European opinion in 1755 could no longer be reached by such sentiments. Modern attacks on the concept of the soul had made doctrines of sin and the afterlife more than doubtful. And without them, how could the sufferings of flesh-and-blood human beings in the here-and-now ever be understood, let alone justified?

This old question gets fresh treatment in Susan Neiman's challenging study, *Evil in Modern Thought*. Her book is principally a historical treatment of thinking about the problem of evil from Lisbon to Auschwitz, and secondarily an argument about how best to approach it today. This is an accessible work of philosophy in the best sense, sharply focused on matters of vital human concern and free of the donnish tics that mar even allegedly popular works by AngloAmerican philosophers. For Ms. Neiman, the problem of evil is not a holdover from a lost theological age, it is "fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world" and therefore deserves a central place in philosophical reflection today. At certain points in the book she goes even further, asserting that "the problem of evil is the guiding force of modern thought," but this historical claim is never developed convincingly and it is not clear it could be. She is on much stronger ground when presenting herself as an explorer discovering a forgotten trail.

Most of the book consists of two long and fascinating chapters tracing the rise and collapse of modern "theodicy": the philosophical attempt to justify the ways of God to man. The need for theodicy arises with the experience of suffering, and we find examples of it throughout the biblical tradition, from the Book of Job to Saint Augustine and beyond. But it is really with the development of secular modern philosophy, in which appeals to revelation became suspect, that theodicy came into its own. For millennia God had justified man; now man, on the basis of his own reasoning powers, would try to justify God and the existence of evil in divine creation. The term "theodicy" was coined by Leibniz, who in making the case for God distinguished between at least two senses of the term "evil." There is moral evil, which for believers is at the root of sin and which nonbelievers think of as a will to wickedness; and then there is natural evil, which is the suffering we experience in a world corrupted by our sin. Ms. Neiman makes a great deal of this distinction, focusing especially on how the idea of natural evil was transformed from a theological concept into a historical and even psychological one in modern thought. It was with this modern, secularized concept that we tried, and eventually failed, to make sense of the horrors of the twentieth century.

The source of this new conception of natural evil was Rousseau. In the wake of the Lisbon earthquake Voltaire had written a bitter poem challenging all Christians with the question: So where is your God now? In response, Rousseau wrote a long letter to him in which he exculpated God by defending the goodness of the natural laws that shape our world; he inculpated man for being the proximate cause of suffering by departing from nature and disobeying its laws. Did God decree that we live in cities with tall buildings prone to collapse? Did he command the residents of Lisbon to return to their unsafe homes to salvage their worldly riches? No, the sufferings of Lisbon were not caused by God, but by man.

However, at this point, and unlike his theological predecessors, Rousseau refused to invoke the concept of moral evil. Man is not inherently wicked or fallen, he insisted, man is naturally good. But if that is the case, how does evil arise? Rousseau's influential answer was, in a word, "history": at a certain point in human development man departed from nature, and this rendered him responsible as a species, if not as an individual, for evil in the world. There is indeed, as Voltaire's poem had it, "evil on the face of the earth," but we are not fated by divine decree to suffer it; nor should we expect a redeemer to remove it. Rather, Rousseau's lesson, in Neiman's words, was that "we should worry about the evils for which we're responsible, and God will take care of the rest."

Rousseau's conception of evil shifted the burden of responsibility for it from God to the human race, not to individual men but to the larger social forces they create and which, from the

individual's perspective, can resemble blind fate. This move opened up a host of old and new problems, foremost among them whether there is any guarantee that we will escape suffering in the world simply by rooting out the evils in our individual hearts. If large social forces are at work, that may appear unlikely, unless we follow Rousseau in assuming the existence of a God who ensures the connection between goodness and happiness. Ms. Neiman sees the ambitious philosophical systems of nineteenth-century Germany as at least in part responses to the need for hope on this score; from Kant's attempt to reconcile nature and morality, to Hegel's account of man's gradual self-divinization in history, to Marx's call for revolutionary action ("philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it"). Seen from the standpoint of the problem of evil, all these systems appear to be grappling with the paradox that the more man takes responsibility for the world away from God and places it on large social forces, the less capable he may be of explaining and justifying that world to himself. That is why, in Neiman's view, Hegel and Marx were tempted to close the gap between the human and divine by making man over into something approaching a god.

An alternative to self-divinization might have been to scale back our desire to explain the world and simply reconcile ourselves to fate and reason's impotence before it. That was the response of the skeptics like Pierre Bayle and David Hume, who located the source of many of our troubles in exaggerated intellectual ambition, which made us susceptible to the ravings of religious fanatics who only compounded the evils in the world. Neiman does not think skepticism is a serious option, less on psychological grounds than on reasonable ones. Following Kant, she sees reason as having legitimate needs, among them the need to understand the conditions under which it functions, and among these conditions is the existence of evil.\* "It's on the problem of evil that reason truly stumbles," she writes. "For here reason is not merely in trouble but in pain.... Either evils are close to illusion, in which case there is no problem, or reason is utterly helpless, in which case there is no answer." At the end of this skeptical road she sees only nihilism, and she invokes the Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche's glorification of suffering in the name of power as indications of where the modern naturalization of evil ended up:

"In demystifying natural and metaphysical evils, Rousseau also decriminalized them.... The more pieces of the world become ordinary, the less threatening the world as a whole. The more things can be viewed as *natural* evils the less evil the world contains -- until the term "natural evil" drops out.... The paradox is just this: the urge to naturalize evil arose from the desire to tame and control it. But the more it is tamed, the more the quality of evil disappears. This leaves us with the fear that evil wasn't captured but trivialized. The banal doesn't shatter the world; it composes it."

This paradox is the book's most important lesson and deserves serious reflection. It also sheds a revealing light on Hannah Arendt's use of the intentionally shocking phrase "the banality of evil" in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which Neiman defends. On her reading, Arendt was pointing to a deep problem in the modern experience of evil, which, in a technological age, is capable of being mechanized and routinized in such a way that it becomes even more difficult to assign responsibility for it using traditional concepts of evil will. Arendt had no intention of exculpating Eichmann; she thought he should hang. Rather, she wanted to help us confront the paradox of naturalized evil by showing us how genuinely difficult it had become. With Eichmann, the question of evil intention turned out to be disturbingly irrelevant: he was what Hermann Broch would have called a "sleepwalker," as were so many who made the machinery of death work with such nauseating efficiency. "They really *didn't* mean it," Neiman concedes, "and it really doesn't matter." The search for willing executioners, of which there were many, can obscure this point and prevent us from looking beyond mere intention. In Neiman's view, "precisely the belief that evil actions require evil intentions allowed totalitarian regimes to convince people to override moral objections that might otherwise have functioned." And it is this belief that must be challenged.

What concept of evil should replace or supplement it is less clear in Ms. Neiman's final chapter than it could be. She quotes with approval Arendt's comparison of radical evil to a fungus, to a kind of parasite that grows without having intentions and perhaps even according to laws of nature, and which is all the more menacing for that. But if there are natural causes of evil there

are probably also natural instruments at our disposal for combating it, which we should use without bothering ourselves overly about the intentions of evildoers. To whatever extent it may be true, for example, that poverty and humiliation lie at the root of crime or terrorism, we should aim to ameliorate those conditions; but the existence of those conditions does not in the least mitigate responsibility for criminal acts, Neiman argues, nor does it limit our obligation to prevent those acts and combat those who commit them. Similarly, nothing in the histories of Germany and Russia, or the anonymity of the bureaucratic structures of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, mitigates the evils they spawned or the responsibility of those who collaborated. One of Neiman's conclusions, if I understand it, is to make us more morally alert to ways in which we participate in evil without intending to do so and to increase our sense of responsibility rather than diminish it.

Her other conclusion concerns our place in a world permeated with evil. This problem recurs throughout the book, beginning with the experience of the Lisbon earthquake and the birth of modern theodicies meant to salve the spirits of those who have suffered, or fear future suffering, in a hostile universe. Neiman believes it is among philosophy's tasks to answer this need and to do so without appeal to God or religion. "If concepts like progress, and evil itself, are reduced to religious origins," she writes, in an uncharacteristically dismissive aside, "the use of them will be monopolized by religious spheres -- and not likely the most scrupulous ones." But even if one shares her philosophical aspiration, it must be admitted that the modern answers offered so far have been less than encouraging. Neiman surveys a number of them in her final pages, only to conclude that, while the need to reconcile the "is" of existence with the "ought" of reason is inescapable, such reconciliation is probably not possible, given the "fractures" of modern experience, Auschwitz foremost among them. So she concludes, somewhat obscurely: "Between the adult who knows she won't find reason in the world, and the child who refuses to stop seeking it, lies the difference between resignation and humility."

This is whistling in the dark. Ms. Neiman, like most of us, wants to have it both ways: she fundamentally accepts the thesis that finds the cause of all evil in human action, yet wants to resist its apparent implication that, once all such actions are themselves seen as a matter of natural evil, the product of social forces, it will be impossible to declare anything to be, simply, evil. How did we come to find ourselves in this position? Neiman's answer seems to be that once modern men and women lost belief in a providential God the false promise of theodicy was exposed; now they must take up alone the burden of identifying the evils they create, uprooting them, and justifying the world to themselves. Following Kant, she wants us to see that it is time to grow up and face the challenge of evil actions. This is bracing advice and appeals to our courage and sense of independence, but it is questionable whether human beings can ever meet this challenge by concentrating simply on themselves. For even if we concede that human beings are responsible for evil appearing in particular times and places, can we really say they are responsible for there being evil at all?

This is the deepest question regarding evil that the biblical tradition tries to address: Where does it come from? Recall that the Book of Genesis begins, not with the problem of divine providence or theodicy, but with the mysterious irruption of evil *and* good in creation. In the first chapter God creates the heavens and the earth, and as he brings forth particular entities -- light, land, water -- he declares them all to be good. Whether this declaration meant that God relies on an independently existing concept of goodness, or whether he created it through fiat, has been the subject of theological dispute for millennia; what has never been in dispute in the Judeo-Christian mainstream is that creation was originally good. The term "evil" does not appear until the second chapter of Genesis, when God causes to grow in Eden the "tree of knowledge of good and evil," from which Adam and Eve will eventually eat. Whether this implies that God was also the author of evil is a puzzle, one that over the centuries has spawned countless debates and heresies regarding multiple creations, evil demiurges, devils, and the like. But, again, the theologians generally agreed that evil entered the world of human experience through knowledge and freedom, which have given us a very mixed legacy.

Ms. Neiman's book begins at the point in history where biblical doctrines like these were beginning to appear mythical, and her decision to forswear examining them gives her story compactness

and great narrative clarity. But it comes at a cost. And that is that it prevents her from exploring whether certain problems regarding evil -- and goodness, which is no less difficult to understand -- might have been obscured, rather than clarified, through modern abandonment of such myths. The most important of such problems is surely (to use a large term) the ontological one: Why are there good and evil *at all*, rather than an indifferent world? Modern thinkers have been notoriously unsuccessful in addressing this issue, let alone resolving it. Rousseau, to his credit perceived the need to address it, which he did by telling his own myth, that of the natural goodness of man and his historical fall into evil through socialization. Kant tripped upon it in his moral philosophy and declared there simply to be irreducible principles of good and evil in the mind, and quickly shut the lid on further inquiry -- an inadequate response, as Neiman herself notes. Otherwise the problem was left to marginal and mystically inclined thinkers like Schelling, or to someone like Heidegger, who discussed the ontology of everything but good and evil.

Modern philosophy has no reason to rely on religious myths, but it ignores study of those myths at the risk of narrowing its vision of certain fundamental issues. One reason why Augustine's message to the Roman Christians may have offered them more solace than modern Europeans received after the Lisbon earthquake, and certainly more than we received after Auschwitz, was that his biblical faith provided him with answers to the deepest questions regarding the ultimate sources of evil, questions to which we may have grown inattentive. Augustine's answers may no longer convince, but the problems he addressed remain because they are genuine. It is not the least virtue of Ms. Neiman's refreshing book that it provokes the desire to read another one, this one tracing the history of hope between Rome's fall and Lisbon's tremors.

\*Neiman is also the author of a fine book on reason's needs, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

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