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Susan Neiman's Intellectual Abandon

by Michael Zeeman

In a cynical and disenchanting world Susan Neiman opens up a superb debate on evil and ideals. Her arguments and insights carry far more weight than mountains of footnotes ever could.

In "On Philosophy at the Universities" Schopenhauer writes that the least likely to imagine philosophy as a serious and sacred endeavor are those who teach it. Schopenhauer's resentful and derisive essay is over 150 years old, but it seems as if it could have been written yesterday, so exact is its description of academic philosophy today. Those who really cherish philosophy, Schopenhauer thinks, "will be more powerfully and effectively stirred by every work of any genuine philosopher who happens to come into his hands than is possible through the lectures of a chair-philosopher, such as are given by the day."

For a while, Susan Neiman's philosophical career followed the traditional path to academic respectability. She studied at Harvard with John Rawls and Stanley Cavell and later at the Free University in Berlin. After earning degree and title, she taught philosophy at Yale University and the University of Tel Aviv. From her extensive study of Kant came a well-respected book on his critical philosophy. All in all, a distinguished resume. But it was one that offered little excitement. And that was only to be expected. Does the institutional production of philosophical studies and commentaries ever yield anything surprising? Does it ever generate views that move anyone other than a small circle of colleagues and conference goers?

There are some rare cases. Ludwig Wittgenstein built airplanes; Hannah Arendt worked at a publishing house; and where Michel Foucault picked up his most poisonous insights academia would rather not know.

Neiman's most recent book is *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists*. It appeared last year, which couldn't have been more timely. That ideals are outdated and ideologies-whether political, moral, or cultural-no longer have the slightest chance in a world paved by market capitalism, postmodern skepticism, and globalization was a song so often sung people no longer cared to join in the chorus.

Idealism seemed passé. In reality, though, a metamorphosis was underway. You don't grow up without adversity. Can moral and political questions be answered exclusively through conceptual analysis? Or are they located in life? Is it not childish to relativize such questions with word games that do no more than testify to the cleverness of their inventors? Neiman had enough of that. She threw off her academic cap and gown and embarked on an adventure that brought with it every form of enlightened engagement.

A few years ago, she moved to Berlin-she had been named director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam-and seized on the opportunity. She asked herself how past philosophers had come to terms with evil. (For someone with a Jewish background, Berlin was the right place to ask.) Her answer was *Evil in Modern Thought*, a new interpretation of the history of philosophical

responses to evil trained steadfastly on the major treatises as well as the real history that accompanied them.

The work is as daring as it is liberating. Daring because each of her philosophical thoughts had to be placed within the philosophical tradition. Liberating because in this way philosophy frees itself from the tight corset of professionalism. In a cynical and disenchanted world Susan Neiman opens up a superb debate on evil and ideals. Her arguments and insights carry far more weight than mountains of footnotes or exclusive focus on the big names ever could.

In *Moral Clarity* her fury is palpable. From the dishonest arrogance of the American government to the intellectuals who promote it. Neiman uncovers George W. Bush and his people's never-ending insistence on "realism" as a sneaky form of ideology.

In doing so, Neiman pulls philosophy into the public spotlight, where societal debate takes place. In my opinion, both profit-philosophy and the societal debate-from Neiman's work. One could describe her intellectual abandon as philosophy in the age of Obama: Dare to make use of reason and ask unabashedly moral questions.

After I read *Moral Clarity*, I traveled immediately to Berlin to discuss the book with her. Since then, we've had one long conversation. Our communications arrive from the most amazing places. The last email I received hailed from Haiderabad, India. "I can", she wrote last week, inviting me to hold a talk, "offer you nothing but good conversations and good company." Isn't that just how Socrates lured his audience?

Susan Neiman was born in Atlanta in 1955. She studied philosophy at Harvard and the Free University in Berlin, earning her PhD under the direction of John Rawls. She has taught at Yale University and the University of Tel Aviv. Currently, she is director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam. *Slow Fire*, a memoir about her life as a Jewish woman in 1980s Berlin, appeared in 1992. *Evil in Modern Thought* (2004) and *Moral Clarity* (2008) have received international acclaim. Neiman writes regularly for *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Dissent Magazine*, *Die Zeit*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Freitag*.