Ghastly, Baffling, Cruel and All Too Human

by Damon Linker

On the evening of Sept. 11, President Bush declared that "today, our nation saw evil." By invoking this powerful moral concept, the President perfectly articulated the sentiments of Americans everywhere, who had just witnessed the murder of nearly 3,000 innocent civilians. And yet, as the country struggled in the following days to absorb the cataclysm at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the attacks were just as often described as "senseless."

If Susan Neiman is right, these two contradictory views – one finding moral clarity in Sept. 11, the other no meaning at all – are related to each other. Indeed, as she argues in "Evil in Modern Thought," their intimate connection reveals something important about the character of human life.

According to Ms. Neiman, human beings desperately long to make moral sense of themselves and the world: "The drive to seek reason in the world ... is as deep a drive as any we have." It is so fundamental to who we are, in fact, that most of us go about our lives assuming that "the true and the good, and just possibly the beautiful, coincide."

That is, until we experience an event – the premature death of a loved one, a deadly earthquake, an act of mass murder – that reveals to us that the world does not make as much moral sense as we ordinarily believe. Ms. Neiman argues that a good deal of philosophy arises out of an attempt to grapple with such shattering experiences – and that the history of modern thought cannot be properly understood without recognizing this fact.

Such an argument alone makes Ms. Neiman's book an original one. More often than not, today's professional philosophers neglect questions about the meaning of life and its relation to moral truth. Instead, they focus on solving puzzles in epistemology ("How can I know that I'm not a brain floating in a vat?") and applied ethics ("Is it wrong to kill my children if doing so will save a greater number of lives?"). They also tend to read the history of philosophy through the lens of these technical concerns, with the result that the philosophers of the past, with their very different moral and religious preoccupations, appear to be mere relics of a bygone age.

Ms. Neiman's history could not be more different. She deftly shows that the ideas of the great philosophers emerged from their far-reaching reflections on the most enduring – and troubling of human experiences. She thus conveys those ideas with a vividness that is lamentably rare today.

Ms. Neiman examines several philosophical traditions, but two are of special importance. One began in the 17th century with Leibniz and culminated in Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. In Ms. Neiman's hands, these thinkers become noteworthy for insisting that we stop blaming God for the evil that befalls us and take responsibility for ourselves. Using science and technology, they argued, we could predict and avert natural disasters or diminish their effects. Using social and political reform – or, in Marx's case, revolutionary violence – we could eliminate human brutality and injustice. Needless to say, the modern world has been marked in countless ways by this breathtakingly bold solution to the problem of evil.

Then there is the pessimistic tradition, whose founders include Voltaire, Hume and Schopenhauer. Unlike the first group of thinkers, who seek to create another, better world, these philosophers argue that we must resign ourselves to this world and its evils. For them, the search for overarching meaning is futile, arising from self-deception. Far better, they claim, to affirm an ugly truth than to lose oneself in what can only be a beautiful illusion.

Ms. Neiman shows considerable sympathy for all the thinkers she discusses, but she does not spare them a critique either. She acknowledges that the first tradition has done great damage as well as good. Its more cautious proponents have inspired the great social and technological innovations of the modern age. But its most ardent champions have encouraged the political radicalism that has made modernity an era of so much utopian savagery. (Think of Soviet Russia in the 1930s or China's Cultural Revolution.) Apparently the attempt to eliminate evil ends up unleashing new, virulent forms of it.

As for the second tradition, its proponents have refused to acknowledge the depth of our attachment to the pursuit of moral meaning and thus, in Ms. Neiman's view, betrayed a lack of self-awareness. Mankind cannot just wish away its deepest longings. As Ms. Neiman implies in her final chapter ("Homeless"), human beings inevitably strive to fashion moral meaning, whether they are struggling to comprehend Auschwitz, Sept; 11 or the suffering of a small child. "Belief that there may be reason in the world," she writes, "is a condition of the possibility of our being able to go on in it."

Life is lived – and tentative meaning is forged – in the border zone between sense and senselessness: That is the lesson of this profound and provocative book. It is a lesson worth pondering as we prepare to commemorate Sept. 11 and to revisit the question of why such horrors happen in the first place.

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