

## A mean and rootless fungus

By Jonathan Rée

The good have always been easier game for philosophers than either the bad or the ugly. Goodness may be elusive from a practical point of view, but conceptually it is comparatively tractable. Plato maintained that it comes in one form only, and even if he was wrong about that, it is certainly more straightforward than the numberless varieties of badness. If good things get better they finish very good indeed, but when bad things deteriorate they end up worse than bad. They push discourse into a zone of non-negotiable words with an old-fashioned look, like *sin*, *wickedness* and *evil*.

The lexicon of absolute opprobrium has always made would-be rationalists uneasy. There is too much metaphysical bluster about it, and too many appeals to the unspeakable, not to mention hellfire and damnation. The notions of sin, wickedness and evil are so steeped in theology that they have become an embarrassment even to theologians. Except on the wilder side of politics, they have fallen into general disuse. But if they have been cut off, they are certainly not forgotten; they continue to trouble modern morality like an itchy phantom limb.

Ever since the Second World War, outrageous abominations have been discussed in terms of historic place names rather than general concepts: first Hiroshima, and then, as the kaleidoscope of history shifted, Auschwitz. But the inclusion of geo-historical singularities in discussions of universal principles is definitely not to the taste of the drier kind of philosophers. In the tradition they inhabit, a place is a place and not a computable argument. The only addresses they recognize are the Kingdom of Ends, the Ideal City and a few other exclusive condominiums in nowhere-land.

One of the many remarkable things about *Evil in Modern Thought*, by Susan Neiman, is its reminder that philosophy has been here before, and that the experience changed it utterly. On November 1, 1755, the people of Lisbon were celebrating All Saints' Day when their vast and stately city was struck by an earthquake which levelled most of the churches and destroyed some 12,000 other buildings too. The luckier citizens died among cascading timber and masonry, and most of the rest were either swept away in the ensuing tidal wave, or incinerated in a fire that took six days to burn itself out. Perhaps 60,000 people died. Throughout Europe, Lisbon became a byword for unconscionable evil, the very embodiment of *malum* and *malitia*, *das Böse* and *das Übel*, *le malin* and *le mal*. Lisbon, according to Neiman, was Auschwitz and Hiroshima rolled into one.

But surely, you will say, there is a world of difference between a natural catastrophe like Lisbon and the man-made enormities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima? No doubt there is; and the question leads to the centre of Neiman's argument. The demand for a clear separation between accidental suffering and malicious evil, she argues, is a peculiarly modern obsession; specifically, it is one of the philosophical scars left by the Lisbon earthquake. Lisbon occurred at a time when notions of divine inscrutability and original sin were losing their appeal, and philosophers were learning to admire the natural world as the tasteful handiwork of a kind and canny god. In 1710, Leibniz published his *Theodicy*, an exercise in impertinent piety designed to defend the creator against a charge of supplying a daily budget of unnecessary evils more dependably than a sufficiency of daily bread. If God was as wise and powerful as it was assumed, then the facts spoke for his malevolence; conversely, if his intentions were benign, then he must be either weak or stupid or both. Leibniz made the case for the defence by denying the reality of the crime: in truth, he argued, there is no such thing as evil. The world that God has graciously created is the best one possible, and if it strikes us as unsatisfactory, that is because we do not have the privilege of seeing it from his point of view. Or, as Alexander Pope put it in 1734: "And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite, / One truth is clear, 'Whatever IS, IS RIGHT.'"

Philosophical optimism has its sombre side of course. The assurance that this is the best of all possible worlds is cold comfort if all it means is that nothing better was ever on offer. It is hard to be cheered up by the thought that the world as we find it is as good as it ever gets. Still, a remarkable number of eighteenth-century thinkers, including Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant, found solace in Leibnizian optimism; or at least they did so till they felt the aftershocks of November 1, 1755. Clearly the Lisbon earthquake was not a refutation of theodicy, any more than Sodom and Gomorrah or the tribulations of Job. Leibniz, if he had still been alive, could have gone on insisting that "an imperfection of the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole", and Pope could have repeated his maxim, "All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee; / All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see." But if Lisbon was less than a deductive argument, it landed a terrible blow on philosophy all the same.

Voltaire, elderly and prosperous, was bewildered: "Lisbon lies in ruins", he wrote, "and here in Paris we dance." Rousseau was annoyed by the old man's self-indulgence, and responded by hammering out his distinction between a natural world of contingencies that are neither good nor bad, and a moral sphere whose rigours are confined within the limits of human history. The earthquake was an innocent physical happening, and the evils it led to were attributable to civilization, especially the practice of herding people together in cities.

Rousseau's conceptual manoeuvres, according to Neiman, mark the beginning of the modern account of evil, and indeed of modernity itself. When *Émile* came out in 1762, its religiosity upset the *philosophes* as much as its blasphemies offended the Church, and if we find it hard to appreciate its novelties today it is because they became part of the conceptual landscape long ago.

Rousseauism entered the philosophical unconscious, according to Neiman, through Immanuel Kant. Neiman has already

written an excellent monograph tracing the presence of the notoriously unbuttoned libertarian in the famously strait-laced world of the critical philosophy. In the *Unity of Reason* (1994), she recalled Kant's claim that Rousseau had found a "hidden law" amid the apparent chaos of historical events just as Newton had discovered a rational order within the profuse variety of nature. "After Newton and Rousseau", he wrote in 1765, "God is justified, and Pope's thesis is henceforth true." But the optimism that Kant derived from his intellectual heroes was a world away from Leibnizian cosmic complacency. It was a matter of faith rather than knowledge. If Newton had revealed reason at work within nature, it was only because he had planted it there in the first place; and Rousseau was simply extending Newton's conjecture when he constructed his notion of humanity as the author, however unreliable, of its own fate. Newton and Rousseau came together in Kant's conception of reason as a compulsive craving of the human soul: not a secure accomplishment, but an anxious and risky appeal for order in a world that might as well not care.

The signature theme of modernity, as Neiman sees it, is what might be called the moral gap: the Kantian idea that morality needs to be buoyed up by hope rather than tied down to experience. Neiman offers a history of the gap in a series of intellectual portraits in which the canonical modern philosophers are posed against a backdrop of theodicy and the problem of evil. Kant thought that the laws of nature and the laws of human freedom run on separate parallel tracks, whereas Hegel and Marx, in their different ways, liked to imagine them meeting up as history's ultimate horizon. Hume, Sade, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud, on the other hand, preferred the end of illusion to the end of history, thriving on the fresh and bracing air of moral absurdity. But Neiman finds the blithe pessimists as unconvincing as the bleak progressives, and turns at last to the only thinker apart from Kant who commands her complete sympathy: Hannah Arendt.

If Lisbon was a blow against classical theodicy, then Auschwitz, as Arendt understood it, was a threat to classical doctrines of progress. The bureaucratic machinery of the death camps could hardly be seen as a moment in some positive dialectic, and the only obvious alternative was to regard it as the outcome of spectacular moral depravity, rooted in the noisome depths of the German national psyche. But Arendt refused this much-travelled path, and in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she argued that while Nazi murders were unprecedented in their extent, the intention behind them was not particularly malign. The agents of the Final Solution were ordinary cowards rather than virtuoso immoralists, and the evil that they did arose not from transcendent nastiness but from dreary banality.

This analysis met with hostile fury when it was published in 1963, but Arendt never repented. In a letter to Mary McCarthy she owned up to having reached her conclusions "in a curious state of euphoria". She knew it was a tough thing to say ("proof positive that I have no soul"); but after many years she still felt "light-hearted about the whole matter". Neiman supports Arendt unreservedly, invoking a letter to Gershom Scholem in which she described evil as essentially superficial: not a mighty oak but a mean and rootless fungus that spreads with bewildering speed and then disappears just as quickly. Arendt, according to Neiman, found a way of facing up to Auschwitz that did not require her to fall out of love with existence. Like Kant, she constructed a kind of theodicy – "a framework to help us find our way in the world without making us too comfortable in it".

Obviously this is not theodicy as Leibniz understood it. But Neiman works like an inventive musician; her "alternative history of philosophy" is designed to bring out themes that other interpreters have left unexplored. She invites us to hear the philosophy of the past three centuries as an extended meditation on the problem of evil rather than the familiar punch-up between scepticism and science. And the problem of evil as she interprets it is "fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world"; it has no necessary connection with God or religion, and reaches far deeper than any theological special pleading. An attentive response requires us to dig beneath the familiar contrast between objective nature and moral subjectivity, and the associated distinction between unlucky accidents and deliberate malice. If she is right, then the space where Leibniz's God stood before he absconded can only be filled by the kind of transcendental wager suggested by Kant.

Neiman admires everything about Kant apart from his presumption that reason and system are two sides of the same coin. Rationality as she understands it takes the form of points rather than lines, of shards and fragments rather than completed structures; and she is not only a fine analyst but an acute stylist too, both scintillating and self-disciplined – a very rare thing in a philosopher. If her jumps are sometimes hard to follow, they are always exciting to contemplate. As she says, it is a pity that "philosophy, like some people, was prepared to accept boredom in exchange for certainty as it grew to middle age", and she concludes by praising the joggedness of children who refuse to be fobbed off with the sullen intellectual defeatism of adults. A childish insistence that the world must find room for reason, come what may, is the only thing that can deliver us from evil.

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