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# This Philosopher Thinks It's Time We Call Out Evil in Our World

In a new book, Susan Neiman argues that by defining evil in terms of individual monstrosity we fail to perceive its widespread hold on our culture.

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Widespread misapprehensions about what evil is, Neiman argues, make people too reluctant to use the word. Godong/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

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**CALL IT EVIL: Understanding the Trump Era**, by Susan Neiman

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Susan Neiman has noticed a paradox. “As the world drifts toward disaster,” she writes in her new book, “our language has become more cautious.” Yet this tentativeness has been remarkably asymmetrical. President Trump loves to use hyperbole (“[nasty](#),” “[sleazebag](#),” “[vermin](#)”), while establishment Democrats have, at least until recently, mostly hewed to the language of decorous risk aversion.

In “Call It Evil: Understanding the Trump Era,” Neiman argues that widespread misapprehensions about what evil is make people too reluctant to use the word. Despite her willfully provocative title, she categorically states: “This is not a book about Donald Trump.” An American-born moral philosopher now based in Germany, Neiman wrote an incisive [history of evil in modern thought](#) in 2002. Her new book is less a philosophical exploration than a polemical guide to the current moment. She believes that people are so attached to understanding evil in terms of individual monstrosity — the gleeful villain, the depraved sadist — that they lose sight of how evil more typically works.

She recalls an interview with a podcast producer who kept asking her about a gruesome case of cannibalism in Florida. Even when she tried to tell him that such incidents distract from evils she considered more common and more dangerous (“making war to stay in power”; cutting aid to lower taxes on the rich), the producer kept returning to the lurid particulars.

Neiman wants readers to think about evil in ways that are less spectacular and more systemic. She cites Hannah Arendt’s concept of “the banality of evil” as especially useful. The fact that Arendt was denounced for it illustrates our stubborn reluctance to see evil as anything but demonic.

Arendt was writing about Adolf Eichmann, one of the Nazi organizers of the Holocaust, and her critics excoriated her for depicting him as a desk-murderer marked by “sheer thoughtlessness.” But Arendt insisted that this didn’t make him any less guilty, or any less evil — quite the opposite. What makes such evil so destructive is that it has no depth, Arendt said: “It can

overgrow and lay waste to the world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface.”

The consequences of this line of thinking are generative but intensely uncomfortable. Neiman realizes that plenty of anxious liberals may agree with her condemnation of the Trump era but nevertheless blanch at her terminology. “Evil is the most explosive word we have,” she writes. “Used indiscriminately, it can serve to stir up evil itself.” To call something evil marks a limit, and gestures at a terrible realm beyond it. “Crimes are things for which we have procedures,” she says. “*Evil* is what you say when your jaw begins to drop if you sense that a line has been crossed.”

What happens when one person’s jaw drops and another person’s doesn’t? It’s a conundrum that lies outside the scope of this bracing book. Neiman spends very little time delineating why she has decided that “evil” is the apt word for “a country where masked men deport people to wastelands they’ve never seen,” as she puts it, or “a military that blows fishermen to bits with the meagerest of justifications.”

If you are unbothered by such events, “Call It Evil” is not for you. Neiman says she didn’t want to clutter her book with “nuance and detail,” because she intended it as an intervention. Her goal, she says, is “to sound an alarm.”

To that end, “Call It Evil” has three main parts. “What’s at Stake” argues that our misunderstanding of evil has lulled us into complacency, so that we now take cruelty and corruption for granted. “What Convinced Us” explains how tribalism and an ideology of self-interest undermined our commitments to one another. Market fundamentalism elevated economic rationality over moral reasoning. Brutality and ruthlessness became signs of a politician’s “authenticity.” Neiman, a Jew living in Germany, points to what happened after the killing of 1,200 Israelis on Oct. 7, when the memory of the Holocaust was invoked to justify the killing of 70,000 Palestinians in Gaza. The result, she says, has been a deepening moral cynicism.

Her third section, “Ways Out,” offers prescriptions. Neiman says that identity politics is a dead end. (She made a similar argument in her previous book, [“Left Is Not Woke.”](#)) Another dead end is communism, which she says is beholden to “the same worship of economic necessity” as capitalism. What she recommends is a “resolute universalism” paired with social democracy. She cites Albert Einstein’s characterization of such a political system as “the only way to advance beyond the predatory phase of human development.”

Einstein features prominently toward the end of the book, as an example of someone who responded to moral wrongs with moral courage. Neiman says that the standard depiction of the scientist as a wild-haired absent-minded genius neglects his adamant political commitments — and how those commitments brought him closer to peril than many Americans may have imagined. The F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover saw to it that [Einstein’s mail was monitored and his phone calls were tracked](#). The surveillance ended only when Einstein had a few weeks left to live. His F.B.I. file ran to more than 1,400 pages.

Neiman details how even before Einstein emigrated to the United States he was the target of a right-wing campaign to deny him a visa. After he was sworn in as an American citizen in 1940, a colleague advised him to avoid public appearances that might draw political ire: “In the long run, your safety will depend on your discretion.”

But Einstein chose to ignore this advice. He used his fame to speak loudly about injustice. He wasn’t a communist, but he warned that the Red Scare was tearing his adopted country apart. He received hate mail and death threats. A few days after Einstein’s death, a far-right clergyman urged Congress to stop admitting refugees so that the United States would not, God forbid, “get another Einstein.”

The notion that Einstein was a danger to the United States sounds ridiculous. Then again, imagine the kind of hostility he would have faced today. Neiman quotes Ece Temelkuran, a Turkish journalist who had to leave Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s autocratic Turkey and [currently lives in exile](#).

Without using Arendt's terminology, Temelkuran suggests how easy it was early on to miss that something insidious was overgrowing and laying waste to her country. Such slow-motion moral decay becomes clear only "after severe damage has been wreaked on the fundamental concept of justice, and once the minimal morality you didn't know you depended on has been destroyed."

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**CALL IT EVIL: Understanding the Trump Era** | By Susan Neiman | Norton | 230 pp. | \$27.99