BOOKS

The Midterms of Good and Evil

After decades of avoiding the subject, Democratic candidates are speaking in explicitly moral terms.

By Gal Beckerman

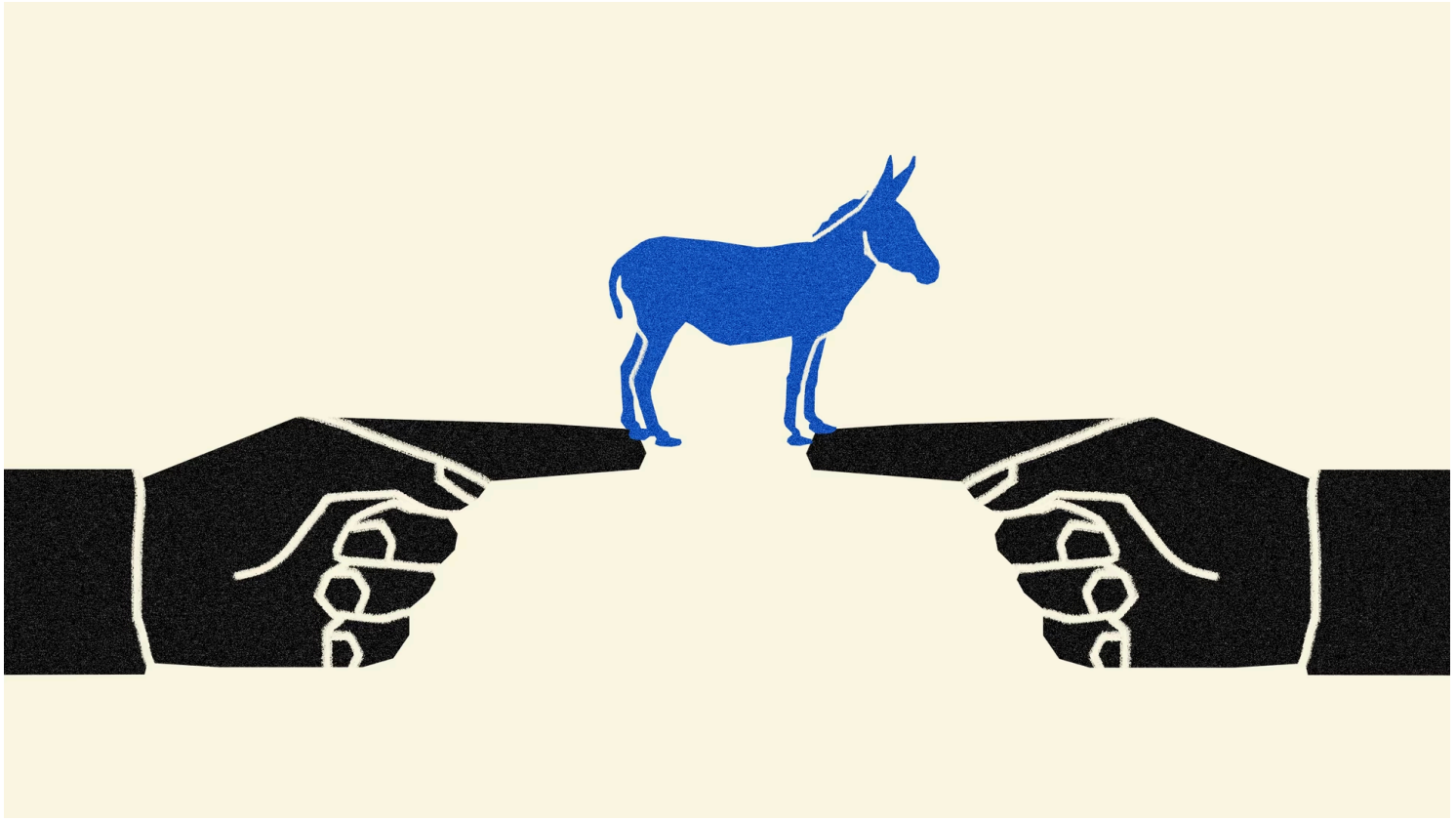


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For a long time now, Democrats have mostly avoided the language of moral judgment. The average American wasn't alive when Jimmy Carter inveighed against the "self-indulgence and consumption" of his fellow citizens, and even that seemed to be an aberration. Until this election cycle, that is. Now Senator Chris Murphy is worried about "America's spiritual unraveling," and Abdul El-Sayed, the Democratic senate candidate in Michigan, regularly calls out the "moral rot" of the Trump administration. Raphael Warnock and Cory Booker speak in sermon-ese, and Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro likes to slap a lectern and say, "I know my Bible!" My favorite example, though, is the Texas Senate candidate James Talarico's campaign slogan, lifted straight from the gospels with a wink at Jesus's rebuke to the money changers: "It's time to start flipping tables."

This is not about finding religion—though faith is a factor: Talarico is one of 12 Democrats who have run for federal office this year who are pastors, former clergy, or seminary students. What is more widespread, rather, is a sudden willingness to speak in universal and absolute terms about norms of behavior—about right and wrong. Post-Carter Democrats have usually presented themselves as the party of technocratic solutions, fetishizing policy or the pragmatic value of—Bill Clinton's favorite word—*triangulation*. Now their message sounds like it's being delivered from a pulpit rather than a bureaucrat's desk, a moral imperative best summed up in the title of Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear's new memoir: *Go and Do Likewise*.

I hold one man responsible for this altered tone, and it's not Jesus. When you have a president whose worldview resembles something out of *Squid Game*; who has talked about being constrained only by his "*own* morality," whatever that may be; who characterized soldiers who died for a cause larger than themselves as "suckers" and "losers," then political physics suggests that the pendulum will soon swing in the other direction.

There is a crude and simple way for Democrats to respond to Donald Trump's flamboyant amorality, and we're seeing some of it in action. They might simply label everything that he has done (immigration crackdowns, elective wars, tariffs) as "evil,"

strongly implying that they are the corrective, the "good." The Christian right often deploys the language of morality in this Manichaean fashion—it's the logic by which the evangelist Jerry Falwell once declared Trump to be a "good, moral person." But the concept quickly cancels itself out when it becomes just another rhetorical weapon. At a rally in Michigan this summer, J. D. Vance said there was something "very, very evil" about El-Sayed—who responded by saying, "Let me tell you what's evil," and then cataloged the administration's policies.

To truly name and confront evil—not as just a synonym for *things we don't like* but as a foundational concept deeper than day-to-day politics—is, to put it mildly, hard. For people not inclined toward religion, the idea of an ultimate badness seems impossible to extract from theology (an objection I'll get to). And for those who do have faith, the word might feel too heavy, too spiritually fraught, and too absolute to toss around on the profane battleground of politics. And yet, a working definition of *evil* might be what we need to recognize what has gone so askew, not just in the current administration but in society, in us.

Susan Neiman, the moral philosopher, has titled her new book *Call It Evil: Understanding the Trump Era*, but she is quick to explain, on the second page, that "this is not a book about Donald Trump." What she means is that someone who proudly says that he could shoot someone on 5th Avenue without any repercussions couldn't triumph in our political system unless the ground was already prepared for him. The evil she wants us to get comfortable naming is more pervasive than just one man or party. And Democrats rushing to counter Trump with righteousness should pay attention.

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Neiman, who has lived mostly in Berlin since the 1980s and served as the director of the Einstein Forum, is a prominent defender of the battered ideals of the Enlightenment. In her books, she has maintained that reason, moral judgment, and the aspiration to universal human dignity—legacies of the early modern thinkers—are worth preserving. They just need some blood flowing through them again. Evil, in particular, has been her special interest for a long time; it was the subject of her most influential book, *Evil in Modern Thought*, published in 2002.



Call It Evil: Understanding the Trump Era

By Neiman, Susan

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Like Hannah Arendt in her famous book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Neiman is less interested in evil as the province of monsters than as a possibility embedded in ordinary human life. Arendt diagnosed the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann with "thoughtlessness," a habit that can turn mass murder into an administrative task. Neiman builds on this idea in her new book, which is a short, slightly rushed summary of her thinking meant to meet the urgency of the moment. Thoughtlessness is possible, she argues, when morality itself is seen as a joke, as cringe, and when acting out of moral conviction is perceived as a game for suckers and losers. What she names as "the evil that threatens us most today" is "the idea that nothing is evil."

This might sound like a hollow tautology, but to put it another way, she is worried about moral vacuousness. What has shoved aside the notion of good and evil is an ideology of self-interest, which posits that humans are merely animals preoccupied with satisfying their individual needs and increasing their power over others. Or, to borrow the words of that great philosopher Stephen Miller, the idea that "iron laws of the world since the beginning of time" dictate that the planet is governed by "strength," "force," and "power" alone. Neiman would identify the kind of thinking Miller expressed as evil: "The signal evil of our age is the belief that self-interest is all that moves us, and ideas of justice are self-deluded hype. Evil actions are those that deny the possibility of morality."

This ideology of self-interest has become so firmly implanted in modern society that someone like Trump could come across simply as the guy who says the quiet part out loud. In her explanation for how we got here, Neiman distributes blame along the entire political spectrum. Her brief against the left is one of negligence. Gradually, beginning in the 1960s, the left abandoned the language of universal principles for a politics focused on identity and power (one of Neiman's recent books was called *Left Is Not Woke*). In place of an objective idea of justice, liberal and leftist thought has resembled something akin to the French philosopher Michel Foucault's vision of a world of struggle, in which various groups and institutions vie to define reality in terms preferential to themselves. This relativism made morality seem not just irrelevant but also a kind of childish fantasy.

And as the left turned away from Enlightenment universalism, the right propagated an equally cold and cutthroat idea, which has shaped how we think about human nature itself. The laissez-faire market fundamentalism promoted by Milton Friedman saw an unregulated market as leading to the best of all possible worlds. For all of the benefits of capitalism, this ethos of competitiveness, taken to its extreme, necessitated a picture of humans as essentially greedy. This idea that people are ruthlessly self-interested and rational, *Homo economicus*, was supposed to be the basis of a theoretical model, a speculation among early capitalist thinkers such as Adam Smith about how we might act if we were thinking only about maximizing our profit with minimal effort. Yet, Neiman argues, it became accepted not as theory but as truth—that we were "cold-hearted calculators," as the economist Joseph E. Stiglitz put it.

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The result, Neiman writes, is a world in which it seems silly or irrelevant to suggest how things *ought* to be for all of us. Instead, we stomach all kinds of cruelty and corruption, lying and cynicism and shamelessness, because that's just how people behave. This is ultimately what makes an absence of morality so dangerous, so soul crushing, so evil: It forecloses the possibility of goodness.

Neiman's diagnosis feels compelling to me, with one huge caveat. Reading her book, I had a nagging worry that there was no real way to fill this moral vacuum without some kind of faith. How do we regain a common reference point without a supreme being or a shared tradition to adjudicate behavior? Neiman understands that this is a problem, and her answer skirts around it. Whether you find her solution convincing will probably determine if the rest of her argument stands up for you. This is also where I think Democratic politicians eager to speak about morality might have something to learn.

Her answer is, basically, trust your gut. Evil is something we all know when we see it, and we don't need a thunderclap to signal its presence. "Evil is an idea that arises whenever the gap between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be becomes too big to bear alone," Neiman writes. It's the word you use to describe that moment "when your jaw begins to drop," when you sense that "a line has been crossed."

Here are a few test cases from the past couple of years: What do you feel when considering the separation of children from their parents? What about the bombing of an Iranian school that killed 120 students? Or what about the estimated hundreds of thousands of deaths that resulted from cuts to USAID? I'll tell you the feeling these events provoke in me. I call it moral nausea. Neiman would say that by recognizing this feeling of wrongness, of evil, we can claw our way back to an overarching sense of justice.

This is the visceral level at which Democratic politicians—or any politician, really—could be talking about morality. Not as a partisan accusation to volley, but as a sensation that burrows beneath politics and ideology. The current conversation around AI and data centers, for example, feels less like a partisan debate than one about basic human priorities. The discomfort that people feel with a technology that is encroaching into more and more areas of life, and the sense, even if slightly inchoate, that something crucial is being taken away from us—this is the beginning of moral understanding, the basis for moral language. You don't need theology for it.

Neiman wants us to call out evil because she believes that doing so is the only way to call forth its opposite, an awareness and exaltation of the good. For her, this would mean liberals rediscovering principles that felt particularly absent in the age of wokeness, and even long before that: "the commitment to universalism over tribalism, the distinction between justice and power, and the belief in the possibility of progress." The politicians who start championing these principles—and some are beginning to—might find a receptive audience. They speak to desires and impulses that persist beneath the nihilism that floods our communication channels and weighs down our souls.

If you need further convincing, Neiman writes, just think of how strange Trump appears to us. In many ways, it's his absence of moral impulse, his unabashedness, that makes him such a fascinating and compelling character. We don't normally come across individuals like this in our lives and in our communities, where people more often than not selflessly help one another—he feels anomalous. "Might this itself be a refutation of the self-interested power paradigm we are told is universally true?" Neiman writes. "A world in which that model was truly universal would be a world in which everyone behaved like Donald Trump." This is, thankfully, not our world, and we can find solace in being reminded that most people, at bottom, *do* recognize what morality looks like. They live it every day. If only our politics could be guided by the same instinct.

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