

Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown- Up Idealist*, Harcourt Inc, 2008, This 467pp, \$ 27.00, ISBN 9780151011971

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Susan Neiman wrote *Moral Clarity* in an attempt to explain the outcome of the presidential election of November 2004. Neiman views Bush's win as a consequence of the dramatic failure of the Left to have a metaphysical picture of morality that appeals to the voters. Neiman holds that “ western secular culture has no clear place for moral language, and its use makes many profoundly uncomfortable” (4). This inability to speak of morality with a full voice is a result of the contemporary Left’s rejection of idealist visions for more interest-based politics. This rejection led to a total conceptual collapse of the Left. While the Left was floundering for new footing, the Right gladly employed moral vocabulary and repainted itself as the party of morality. Neiman separates the book into three distinct parts each detailing a different aspect of the crisis she is commenting on and the renewal she hopes for. She relies on her narrative style to make arguments by example, providing few clear philosophical arguments. Neiman argues that this situation can best be rectified by with a resurgence of Enlightenment Ideals, happiness, reason, reverence, and hope, which she profiles using a variety of sources from literature, scripture, and works of Enlightenment philosophers.

Neiman’s first task in her section titled “Real and Ideal” is to show the reader how and in what way the Right has sequestered metaphysical concepts from the Left. She discusses political rhetoric and the usage of concepts such as

idealism and realism. She defines ideology as “any comprehensive system of beliefs about the world” (Neiman, 75). Any further use of the terms Left and Right refers to two political ideologies that understand themselves in two very different ways. Neiman examines the views of neoconservative writer Kagan and his adoption of a Hobbesian depiction of reality. The Right presents our reality as one in which peace is valued over justice, in a world where government’s main task is to subdue the nasty power-hungry ambitions of the masses. Under this view, what is Real is power and the institutions that wield it. Neiman connects this to the biblical story of Job. God holds power over Job and wields it as he pleases. Justice is not what matters or what prevails. The diplomatic actions of the United States during the Bush administration were a byproduct of the view that the United States is an all-powerful entity, and as such, all its actions are above appeals to justice.

However, this portrayal of a Hobbesian reality is not how Americans sees themselves and their country “ whatever their political convictions, Americans incline towards metaphysics that underpin their beliefs that ideas of right and justice can transform just about any old world” (Neiman, 39). Until fairly recently, people all over the world held up the United States as an emblem for the Enlightenment actualized. The acknowledgement that most Americans have this self-conception led the Right to adopt a new set of moral vocabulary. Despite their Hobbesian worldview, the Conservatives began employing the language of the Enlightenment. The War in Iraq, rather than a rightful display of power, becomes the United States defending justice as lesser nations watch with

resentment. Americans see themselves remaking the world into one that embodies their American ideals. Since America is a world power, it can make its own reality. The Right believes that anyone who would stand in the way rejects the democratic ideals that underlie these acts of aggression, or if framed in Conservative rhetoric, acts of liberation. Neiman summarizes, "Conservatives have two distinct metaphysics, one in which the only reality is material reality, and another in which ideas move mountains or anything else that gets in the way" (47). Whereas, conservatives have a metaphysics for every occasion, liberals have none, and this lack is the central point of the collapse of the Left in the country.

Neiman presents an unusual profile of terrorists who are wealthy, well-adjusted young people striving to do good and be moral. She aligns terrorist groups with fundamentalist Christians. She says that both groups fulfill material and social needs that secular culture does not meet. Neiman holds that all human have moral needs and strive to view the world in a structured moral way. She states that "to be human is to refuse to accept the given as given" (Neiman, 92). Terrorists and Christian fundamentalists refuse to accept postmodern materialist society as an unavoidable aspect of their own lives. If the Left reclaims Enlightenment values, people searching for meaning will have something to hold onto besides fanaticism. She says, "Many people are drawn to fundamentalism in search of a vision of human nature far closer to the Enlightenment imagination than what's offered in postmodern culture" (Neiman,

92). They seek to be noble. Currently, Liberals can only offer cynicism and gloom as an alternative to their fanaticism.

Although one would expect a book that outlines the evils of the Bush presidency to present and promote liberal ideals, it seems that Neiman is aware that she is writing to a mostly liberal audience. She is overly unsympathetic and assumes facts that in a more neutral dialogue would be up for contention. In this chapter and throughout the book, Neiman defends her viewpoint with statements that are general and without support, such as this one: "Americans assume that good will and hard work can remake the world for the better. Europeans often regard that conviction with bemused detachments, and occasional downright contempt" (41). I have to wonder which Americans she is talking about, and for that matter which Europeans. I know more than a handful of Americans whose cynicism matches any Europeans, and I would guess that the European continent has its share of idealists.

In the second section of the book, "Enlightenment Values", Neiman centers on four: happiness, reason, reverence, and hope. She focuses on Voltaire and Rousseau, presenting two very different philosophers who both positively embody Enlightenment thought. Neiman defends claims against the Enlightenment; and reminds the reader of all that would never have been possible without its principles. Sexual freedom and women's liberation may not have been direct goals of Enlightenment philosophers, but their commitment to reason and universalism led to great strides in these areas. Continuing regimes like the Taliban remind us that we still need these values.

In "Heaven and Earth", Neiman begins a study of Kant's metaphysics and its unique legacy and promise. Kant's distinction between "is" and "ought" is the basis for many of Neiman's arguments. This distinction is central to her claim that Kant offers the most coherent moral framework for social progress. She asserts, "For morality is not a matter of truth, the way the world is; it is, like every principle of reason, a matter of the way the world ought to be. This distinction, between the "is" and the "ought," is for Kant the most fundamental, structuring any experience that is recognizably human" (Neiman "Morality Without Foundation", 89). What "ought" to be cannot be derived from experience. Any moral claims derived from claims about the nature of reality are senseless. Individuals make sense of reality by going beyond it. They begin with the supposition that there is a particular reason why everything happens. Reason takes this supposition and turns it into a question; "For everything that happens there's a reason why it happened this way rather than that" (Neiman, 190). Asking the question "why?" is what allows the individual to conceive what is not yet possible. This capacity of reason to go beyond the "is" is the ultimate source of human dignity. Human beings have an innate need to see the world in moral terms and this stems from the structure of reason. Individuals are naturally inclined to see an "is" and condemn it as not right. This rational criticism allows us to create the "ought" and shape reality. Neiman holds that any progress not seen within these terms is unintelligible. If moral actors do not employ reason to see beyond experience developing laws in opposition to experience; then positive social change will be impossible.

Neiman's position is that all philosophers, excluding Kant, collapse the "is" and the "ought" together and cannot see beyond experience. She examines other philosophers to demonstrate, where they failed and Kant successes. Hume and the empiricists were too scientifically oriented, practicing philosophy mathematically; accepting only facts while ignoring that they themselves have made those facts. Rousseau needed to ground his dreams of revolutions in something. Kant recognizes "that the world is irrevocably split" between these two impulses and he considers each (145). Neiman concludes that Kant's distinction between the "is" and the "ought" and his reliance on reason allow him to see beyond experience and promote positive social change.

In her discussion of reason, Neiman addresses abstraction by which she means removing oneself from one's history to find a rational framework. Although she admits that no one can fully escape his or her embedded self, she advocates John Rawls's original position. Society should approach morality and try to create a community in which we could live as every member. Morality should not be a description of society, but a demand on it. Neiman thinks, "Reason is a way of fighting back against contingencies" (214). The constant division of the embedded and abstracted selves tears the individual apart and reason becomes a tool to aid this division.

"Good and Evil", the third and final section of the book, explores the concepts of evil and heroism through an Enlightenment viewpoint and in a modern context. She begins with a retelling of the Odyssey with Odysseus as an Enlightenment hero. Odysseus chooses humanity over divinity several times.

Neiman views that choice is an affirmation of the finite nature of human life. Individuals live most fully when they dwell in the realm of humanity and reason. Neiman explains that “heroes give us alternatives to resignation” and Odysseus always chooses to continue searching for home, no matter how pleasant the bed he is currently occupying (321).

Neiman follows with a discussion of intentions and consequences, allowing her to claim that whatever the intentions of Bush administration their actions were evil. She asserts that the consequences of one’s actions are what matter the most. Neiman is firm in her stance that moral actors and the institutions that they comprise are responsible for their actions. The banality of Nazi War criminals is an example of how ordinary men can do monstrous things behind a desk. History and countless psychological studies have shown that “under the wrong sort of circumstances, most of us are capable of the wrong sorts of actions” (Neiman, 335). The Bush administration has engaged in many such sorts of wrong action. Neiman focuses on the actions whose evil is insidious and promotes moral callousness.

Although Neiman’s chapter on Enlightenment heroes is very interesting to read, the reader may begin to wonder what particular relevance it has to the book. Neiman’s admiration for Kant and his position on the particular moral value of the hero is the connecting factor between her lovely profiles and any philosophical point. She profiles modern Enlightenment heroes because she sees them as confirmations of the possibility of morality. In an essay on Kantian ethics, Neiman writes that Kant admired heroes because “ the willingness to give

up one's life, the basis of all other desire, bears witness to our awesome capacity to transcend nature itself" (Neiman "Without Foundation", 92). Neiman's heroes, whether farming in the Gaza Strip or rebuilding villages in Afghanistan, are examples of individuals acting for the sake of the moral law. Neiman thinks that Kant's ethics raise the question of what conditions turn shopkeepers into heroes, and in the last section of her book Neiman seems to be showing what conditions are necessary to turn members of modern society into heroes.

Neiman concludes the book with a further examination of the story of Job. She sees Job as a lesson that the universe does not always reward the just. This becomes a discussion of how complicated and difficult achieving moral clarity can be. Neiman explains that this should not serve as an impediment from trying; "we are finite and fallible and struggling, and we are nonetheless the source of moral reasoning" (424). The failures of the Bush administration have left the country with a distaste for moralism, but Americans cannot allow the perversion of moral language to dictate the terms in which they consider it. In order to change the status quo and reclaim some sort of moral conscientiousness, Neiman appeals to the reader to make small changes and to challenge authority while working from the ground up. This conclusion is rather disappointing. She recommends that trying to strive for moral clarity people should "live for it, making small decisions every day about what that comes to" (Neiman, 426). There are over four hundred pages and the concluding thought is that we should turn down the heat!

A central problem with Neiman's position is that she does not take seriously the idea that there exists an intelligible alternative to Kant's metaphysics that supports progressive liberal politics. In his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty explains liberal social progress without an appeal to philosophy and a commitment to a system of reasoned ideals. Rorty describes the aim of his work in this way, "I shall try and show that the vocabulary of the Enlightenment rationalism, although it was essential to the beginning of liberal democracy, has become an impediment to the preservation and progress of democratic societies" (Rorty, 44). Instead of a philosophical foundation, he recommends employing vocabularies that focus on moral and political reflection. Rorty holds that culture, family, and habit form commitments to progressive politics and that discussing metaphysical ideals is irrelevant to political and social progress. Rorty's conception of progress reflects his vision of how modern society could achieve it:

"Instead of seeing progress as a matter of getting closer to something specifiable in advance, we see it as a matter of solving more problems. Progress is, as Thomas Kuhn suggested, measured by the extent to which we have made ourselves better than we were in the past rather than by our increased proximity to a goal" (Rorty, "Achieving Our Country", 28). Rorty sees this better future as a liberal society in which everyone recognizes contingency and frees itself from its need to examine metaphysics.

Rorty's central position begins with an assertion that there is such a thing as moral progress and that its end goal is human solidarity. Unlike Neiman, Rorty

does not see this human solidarity stemming from a “recognition of a core self, or a human essence in all human beings” (Rorty, 192). Instead, he thinks that society should view solidarity as a “further recognition that traditional differences are unimportant compared with similarities we feel like humiliation and pain” (Rorty, 192). This view allows for the creation of solidarity instead of the discovery of non-historical metaphysical fact. Adopting this view will allow members of society to increase their range of “usness”. Rorty describes this as the “imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” (xvi). By increasing their range of “usness”, members of a community will contribute to progressive liberal politics because increasing empathy between different contingencies better equips society to avoid cruelty. Rorty’s Liberal avoids causing cruelty above all else. Novels and ethnographies present stories of suffering from other cultures exposing readers to the other’s suffering, and revealing what cruelties the reader is capable of perpetuating. Since Rorty feels that novels and ethnographies are the best descriptions of pain and humiliation, they will further our range of “usness” more than other instruments, such as philosophical treatises. Novels and ethnographies are then the best contribution to progressive liberal politics.

Critics have equated Rorty's affirmation of Kuhn's view of progress as a kind of metaphysics. They point out that if increasing "usness" leads to the goal of bettering society, then the goal of society will eventually become increasing "usness". However, an understanding of how Rorty conceives ironism and final vocabulary can provide a defense. An individual's final vocabulary is the

language that they use to justify all their beliefs, hopes, and actions. These words “tell the story of our lives” (Rorty, 73). Ironists are constantly aware that the words that define their world may change. They are “always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus themselves” (Rorty, 74). This belief frees Rorty from the charge of metaphysics. Even if his belief in progress and solidarity are vital parts of his conception of his self, Rorty never believes in Progress and Solidarity, the universal ideals built into the world and discoverable by reason. Rorty affirms Kuhn’s definition of progress within his contingency. He does not believe in its universally ultimacy as a metaphysician would.

Rorty can argue that his position is an intelligible alternative to Kant through his Wittgensteinian conception of meaning. Rorty holds that language is purely contingent and conforms to the needs of a certain community rather than to a reality that exists independent of time and place. Because of the contingent nature of language, Rorty views “truth as a property of sentences” and not a property of reality divorced from community (21). Communities create vocabularies based on their changing needs and humans develop sentences as a tool for that communication. Human beings create vocabularies that contain sentences. Rorty explains: “To say that the truth is not out there is simply to say that that where there is no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creation” (5). Because of this, humans must construct all truth. This property of truth construction and the existence of a multitude of different societies with differing

needs leads certain truths to only have meaning in contingent language games. What makes sense in one culture may not necessarily make sense in another one. Rorty thinks that some truths are positions that are better tools for dealing with the world in some circumstances than others. Members of a society “converge on passing theories” that best fit their needs; and the theories become the ones that have a place in their language game (14). Rorty explains, “to have a meaning is to have a place in the language game” (21). Something that has meaning is intelligible. Any position that has a place in the language game is intelligible. Therefore, Rorty can claim that his position of liberal progress is intelligible because it has a place in the language game that Rorty is describing a pragmatic liberal view.

The main source of contention between Neiman and Rorty’s position is not one of content, but rather one of justification. Neiman and Rorty have similar positions on equality, extensive individual liberty and autonomy, and democratic ideals. Both would vote on the same side of political issues, but they have a fundamental disagreement. The Liberal project must find its justification within a rational framework of ideals. Any justification attempted outside this framework is unintelligible. According to Rorty’s position, the individual can only find justification in the contingent framework that in which he or she participates. There is no objective moral ground. We have grown-up in North America with liberal values, and no other justification is required for us to act according to those values. There is no objective ground to justify claims.

In response to Rorty's ironism, Neiman could argue that knowing which changes are positive is possible only if you are able to stand outside contingent arrangements. Her argument begins with the premise that what shapes a person's view of reality is differing cultural viewpoints of habit and custom. This leads to a problem because it becomes difficult to make definite moral judgments between these cultural viewpoints; "what can custom say about the habits of southern slave societies that saw traditional paternalism as preferable to the wage relations of the capitalist North" (Neiman, 137). Neiman would hold that because of Rorty's position on contingency, he has no basis to criticize these customs since his only touchstone is contingent language. Anti-Kantian Pragmatic Liberals, like Rorty, turn contingent arrangements into necessities that a person cannot challenge. "As long as your ideas of what's possible are limited by your ideas of what's actual, no other idea has a chance" (Neiman, 140). Social criticism is only possible if people are able to criticize certain contingent arrangements. Without a foundation based on reason for liberal politics, Rorty cannot justify any of his contingent practices. Without it, people might be contributing to social change but they cannot know they are doing it. Society could be condemning itself to past arrangements that are viewed as progressive, but might actual be oppressive.

Neiman is trying to establish culturally transcendent goals embedded in reason. She thinks that the Enlightenment's use of reason can clarify what people *really* ought to do instead of presenting ideals within a contingency. She admires Richard Rorty's position that family and culture, not metaphysical claims,

shape Liberal activists. However, she proposes that “habits are just habits, and those that require any effort tend to succumb to political inertia in the absence of principle” (Neiman, 76). Neiman holds that ironism leads to disillusionment and hopelessness. All people “want a worldview that doesn’t blink when confronted with reality, that doesn’t wish away what it doesn’t want to see” (Neiman, 78). She sees ironism as a withdrawal from trying to act upon the world for change and an acceptance of a person’s inability to shape his or her reality. Neiman is offering truth with a capital T, and only this Truth has the power to propel political passion.

Rorty could object to Neiman’s criticism by appealing to the power of national pride. He believes that as long as Americans maintain "emotional involvement with one's country- feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative or productive" (Rorty, “Achieving Our Country”, 1). It is the common narration of a country’s past that compels citizens to act on a country’s behalf, not a common belief in Truth. This pride is not an acceptance of the atrocities that America has committed, rather the young ironist will look upon these atrocities and see himself as contemporary American’s saving grace. This tendency has shaped all the great changes in the last century. Rorty maintains great books like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Jungle* that narrate the human condition within the American story educate and incite in a more effective manner than universal principles. America is a country that is constantly in flux, and grand narratives can adapt to the changing social needs of the country in a way that Truth cannot.

Rorty could respond to Neiman's claim of justification by turning the claim around on her. He could question the justification of Neiman's framework of ideals. As a Liberal, he can criticize anything Neiman can. His liberalism is his way to criticize slavery and oppression, and it does not require reason. She judges through reason that happens to be liberal and it is through this contingent inherited framework that she is operating under that gives her intuitions about morality. Neiman may think she grounds her liberal intuitions in reason, but she reasons within the same contingent framework as Rorty.

Neiman is searching for neutral ground that allows people to claim some justification for their moral claims. Rorty contends that she will not find neutral ground because it does not exist; at least not in the way, she wants it. Any standoff of this kind is artificial and theoretical because of the multitude of different standpoints in which to approach this issue. Other prominent philosophers such as John Dewey, Michael Oakeshott, and John Rawls share the position that society can drop Enlightenment rationalism and still maintain Enlightenment liberalism. They would all grant that "Only a circular justification of our practices, a justification which makes one feature of our culture look good by citing still another (feature of the same culture) is the only sort of justification we are going to get" (Rorty, 57). An individual assumes the particulars of his or her contingent arrangement while justifying it. Rorty maintains that moral actors cannot know, and the best they can do is to maneuver their way through these vocabularies, and show how certain stories of progress have made good things happen. Rorty utilizes Makeshift's claim that, "we can keep the notion of

“mortality” just insofar as we can cease to think of morality as the voice of the divine part of ourselves and instead think of it as the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language” (Rorty, 59). Any attempt to universalize or rationalize morality simply frustrates this recognition. Morality should serve as the voice of individuals within a community, expressing “we intentions” and telling a historic narrative, not as an abstracted set of general principles. In a way, this is what Neiman has done; she expresses her strongest claims with historic narratives. The weakest claims she makes are her attempts to create arguments using the Kantian moral framework that she espouses.

It is very interesting to read Neiman’s book after the recent election of President Barack Obama, where the roles that she outlined for the Left and the Right switched. President Obama had a clear message of hope and universalism employing those Enlightenment values just as Neiman recommended, while the Republican candidate John McCain lost any moral direction his campaign might have had in a desperate attempt to appear moderate and separate himself from President Bush. This atmosphere of change and hope that was so essential to the Obama campaign was contingent on a worsening economic system and a deep dissatisfaction with the way that the Republicans were leading the country. The content of Neiman’s position has merit, but her argumentation rests on assumptions that she does not explain in an effective way. Rorty offers an intelligible position that Neiman has not yet narrated away.

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