

Reasonable Doubts

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/2002/12/15/reasonable-doubts/1d1032cb-2c02-425d-b00d-8e1627866e84>

By Reviewed Peter Berkowitz

December 15, 2002

EVIL IN MODERN THOUGHT

An Alternative History

Of Modern Philosophy

By Susan Neiman

Princeton Univ. 358 pp. \$29.95

TRUTH AND TRUTHFULNESS

An Essay in Genealogy

By Bernard Williams

Princeton Univ. 328 pp. \$27.95

Certain segments of sophisticated opinion were scandalized last January when President Bush, in his State of the Union address, declared the existence of an "axis of evil." After all, doesn't the very idea of evil stem from parochial Christian beliefs, or betray a simplistic moral judgment hopelessly out of touch with the world's ambiguities and complexities? Isn't the truth about right and wrong at best inaccessible and probably an empty, discredited ideal? And in any case, who could be so naive in this day and age as to take at face value declarations made in an official public address, as if truthfulness were a serious constraint on the president's speech?

These tenets of sophisticated opinion -- disbelief in evil, rejection of truth, an ironic view of truthfulness as a virtue -- do not, as many critics are eager to charge, merely reflect the rage to deconstruct. They derive sustenance from several highly respectable sources. Our liberal love of freedom disposes us to look askance at authority, particularly moral authority. Our democratic devotion to equality encourages a distrust of special claims, including special claims to know that our moral judgments are true and binding on others. And our commercial culture inclines us to reduce our virtues to calculations about the best way to achieve necessary ends. In short, these tenets -- particularly well-represented in our universities -- point in the direction of the much-maligned and much-misunderstood (especially by its proponents) postmodern relativism. Although it routinely takes its stand

against the moral life generated by liberal democracy and the market economy, postmodern relativism can be seen on reflection as working out and blending together their extreme tendencies. Happily, however, sophisticated opinion is not monolithic, as is amply demonstrated by two fine new books on moral philosophy.

Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* is built around extended interpretations of, among others, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. Neiman's overarching aim is to demonstrate that "the problem of evil is the guiding force of modern thought," and that when this history is understood properly, evil can be seen to be "fundamentally a problem about the intelligibility of the world as a whole." Whereas religious faith (or religious faith as interpreted by modern thought) teaches that natural disasters reflect God's judgment against man, modern thought distinguishes natural evil, or instances of human suffering brought on by causes beyond human control, from moral evil, or suffering that results from acts of human cruelty.

Inspired by the achievement of modern science in explaining and controlling the world, modern philosophy shifts an ever-increasing amount of responsibility for evil from God to natural causes and human actions. At the same time, it shrinks the realm of individual responsibility by explaining human action in terms of natural causes and impersonal social forces. No sooner does Hegel proclaim, in an optimistic vein, that God is dead because human reason is capable of redeeming the evils of the world by making their causes transparent, than Nietzsche raises the possibility (which he viewed with dread) that the death of God truly reveals the powerlessness of our reason to make sense of the world's evil.

Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, argues that, confronted with the enormity of the Holocaust, 20th-century thinkers found new grounds to conclude that what we call evil reflects nothing so much as the unintelligibility of the world. How could civilized people, especially so many small, ordinary people, perpetrate so monstrous a crime? At the same time, Neiman maintains, the Holocaust provided a moral imperative to cling to the idea of evil in order to preserve an idea of the good, to insist on the idea of moral depravity to defend the idea of individual responsibility. Neiman's reasonable -- if anticlimactic and abstract -- conclusion is that we should neither abandon reason nor demand the impossible from it but rather rely on it as much as we can to identify the forms of suffering and acts of cruelty that we have the power to prevent, remedy or diminish.

Bernard Williams, a fellow at Oxford's All Souls College and professor of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley, wants to teach something similarly reasonable -- and finally just as anticlimactic and abstract -- about the imperative to discover and tell the truth. His *Truth and Truthfulness* begins from an observation he rightly traces to Nietzsche: The question of truth's value has become vexed for us as a result of millennia of training in discovering and telling the truth. Eventually, the quest for truth about the world requires that the quest itself be subjected to critical examination. And this reveals its questionableness, its debatable premises, its suspect motives. In our day, this has led to the relativists' supposition

that in the moral realm we can get along very nicely without the illusion of truth. Instead, we should satisfy ourselves with whatever works to advance our favorite ends. Alternatively, we could follow the path laid out by the relativists' academic rivals, the deliberative democrats and discourse ethicists, and embrace what everybody would agree to if only our hearts and minds were freed from the ignorance and prejudice and distorted desire that we bring to conversation and public debate. But these alternatives, Williams shows, are incoherent evasions.

Pursuing his own original thought experiments, exploring fragments from the history of philosophy and a variety of interrelated topics, Williams succeeds in establishing that accuracy and sincerity -- acquiring reliable information about the world and conveying it faithfully -- are "virtues of truth" rooted in the logic of moral and political social life. He also explains that they will never enable us to overcome altogether the opacity and mystification likewise rooted in the basic structure of human affairs. Deftly, and with a certain relish, he explores the barefaced lying and the many subtler forms of deception and self-deception we practice. Williams disavows any moralistic defense of the virtues of truth, sometimes with an alacrity that borders on a moralistic aversion to moralism. Nevertheless, the array of arguments he marshals to cast light on the problem leaves little doubt: If you wish to develop your talents, earn the love of another, or pursue justice, then cultivate the virtues of truth.

Moral philosophy cannot tell us what profession we should enter, whom we should love, or whether we should go to war. These are jobs for practical judgment, and they necessarily involve debatable convictions and risky choices. But moral philosophy can fortify practical judgment in a variety of ways. For example, it can reveal the poverty of that segment of sophisticated opinion that would dismiss the truth about good and evil as irrelevant to our deliberations. *

Peter Berkowitz teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.