BOOK REVIEW

Title: **Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists**

Author: **Susan Neiman**

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The title of Susan Neiman's 2008 book suggests that she will provide the reader some answers, or at least a lens through which they might gain clearer understanding of what is right and wrong in today's world. Neiman argues that moral clarity can be obtained if the reader has the courage to examine critically the world around them and to take required action. Neiman uses historical writings from the past two centuries, religious and secular, to force the reader to reflect on the current state of society. Aspects of society which are good, evil, or, at the very least, disparate, are discussed. This leads readers to reflect on their place within that society. The purpose of which is to suggest alternative possibilities for a framework with which to examine contemporary events.

Neiman has organized this text into three parts: Ideal and Real, Enlightenment Values, and Good and Evil. Her style of moving between the spaces of historical writing and events of contemporary society keeps readers engaged as they too begin to question, with greater awareness that which is so often taken for granted. Beginning with a well recognized story of the Bible, Sodom and Gomorrah, Neiman illustrates how Abraham chooses his course of action by seeking justice and questioning the will of God. The story of Abraham at Mount Moriah depicts a different practice. At this time, Abraham accepts the word of God on faith alone, without question. Some might say that the two stories represent two polarities on the continuum of human action. The former illustrates how one's beliefs require one to question and try to make sense of things, where the later illustrates one simply obeying rules without such questioning.

For those who may not be familiar with either story, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah tells the tale of Sodomites who threaten to rape two strangers who have been granted shelter. Earlier, God had disclosed to Abraham that he intended to destroy the city of sinners. Abraham questioned God, suggesting that there may be innocents among the guilty, and to punish them all would not be right. Abraham is willing to risk his own life to right what he sees as a moral injustice.

Abraham at Mt. Moriah does not demonstrate the same questioning behaviour. When God commands Abraham to sacrifice his own son, Abraham packs up his son and two servants and makes his way to Mt. Moriah. When he arrives, he and his son ready the altar for the sacrifice. Abraham then ties up his son and places him on the altar. As he is about take the knife to his son's throat he is stopped by a messenger. He is told that because he was willing to make such a great sacrifice without question, God will see that he and his off-spring are rewarded.

Neiman's point is that one must question the world in order to make sense of it, seeking justice in what we find, not reward and punishment. Ethical thinking, she argues,

is learned through reflection and is not handed down in the form of dogmatic rules. She argues that religion does not form the basis of morality, nor does self-interest. Making the connection to opposing views in contemporary society, Neiman draws the distinction between conservative and liberalism, a theme which is revisited throughout the book.

Through the first section of the book, *Real and Ideal*, Neiman focuses on the gap between these two concepts, again linking them to present day examples. This section begins with the philosophies of two great thinkers, Hobbes and Kant. Hobbes is used as an illustration of the conservative outlook, to demonstrate the recurring themes of struggle for power and good. In the Hobbesian sense, the rule of law is critical to maintaining order; reality then is fixed. To break the law is to disrupt order. Kant would agree a framework is necessary for order, however, it must be the right framework, based on principles of justice.

Just how this order is maintained varies depending on the use of, and perspective on, power. According to Neiman, it is power that makes the world go around. Neiman refers to the work of political scientist Joseph Nye, who describes variations of power. Soft power in conjunction with hard power are both necessary to influence behaviour. Soft power aims to bring in notions of goodness and self interest, while hard power is simply the big stick of intimidation. Using the example of the George W. Bush administration, Neiman illustrates an unsuccessful use of this coordinated practice. While the power of the United States may go uncontested by many, friend and foe alike may share distaste for the tone of the messages being delivered. Further categorizing power, Nye describes two other types. Command power may succeed in changing what people do but co-optive power is changing what people want. If the George W. Bush administration is an illustration of the former, perhaps some of the appeal of the newest United States President, Barack Obama, is that he appears to practice the later form of power. His dialogical approach, messages of change, and the ability of every person to have an impact were warmly received by many who may have grown weary from being hit over the head in the previous eight years. Ultimately Neiman explains that we need the hard truth if we are to improve the status quo and that soft power should not be used to disguise the truth about a situation, or the rationale for decisions and action taken. Neiman cites the war in Iraq as an example of how thinly veiled motives guide action, suggesting that the rationale for the war was really less about the ideal of justice and spreading democracy (as it was promoted publicly), and more about protecting foreign interests.

The distinctions Neiman makes between ideology, idealism, and realism are important to introducing the next critical concept for this framework, the difference between *is* and *ought*. Ideology is defined as “any comprehensive system of beliefs about the world” (p.75). Ideologies help people to understand themselves in relation to others. Idealism broadly defined means, “a belief that the world can be improved by means of ideals expressing states of reality better than the ones we currently experience” (p.75). Humankind, according to Neiman, needs to recognize how it is shaped by reality, but also needs to pay greater attention to how we can shape that reality.

The Enlightenment was a period characterized by a number of assumptions, including: the perfection of human nature, the infallibility of science, and unlimited potential of reason to solve the ills of the world. Neiman attempts to resurrect this era as a state of mind, applicable to present day. Enlightenment thinking sees progress as inescapable, yet

there are choices to be made. Enlightenment and Fundamentalist thinkers both share the belief that the world can be changed. A Conservative view, according to Neiman, claims to anchor itself in realism, and seems to focus on the worst of humankind. This can be a dangerous self fulfilling prophecy; if people believe things are constantly worsening they are less likely to do something to change this from happening. This obviously is not moving closer to the ideal that Neiman set out to illustrate is possible.

However reality is perceived, according to David Hume, will determine what can be accomplished within that framework. Hume goes on to explain that much about what humankind does has little to do with reason, and more to do with custom or tradition. This was in direct contradiction to Kant who believed that the principles which guide humankind are not customs or habits, but the result of reason. To believe otherwise, would limit our ability to seek justice because we would be recycling customs and habits for all time, maintaining the status quo. According to Neiman “Ideals are not measured by whether they conform to reality; reality is judged by whether it lives up to ideals” (p.140).

How does one reconcile the difference between *is* (realism) and *ought* (idealism)? The divide between the ideas and ideology of the liberal-minded and the realist conservative-minded are again re-visited. According to Neiman, what mediates the two is truth. When we can explain a thing, we are discussing knowledge, not necessarily truth. Moral judgment on the other hand is about what should be truth. To move from one towards the other requires that we acknowledge what has been and look to something which is better. Without the acceptance of ideas, (not necessarily truths), reality would be fixed, maintaining the world much as it has always been. Neiman used the example of the idea that slavery was unjust to illustrate how such an idea can in fact change a reality. There is an almost universal assumption, according to Neiman, that happiness is balanced with virtue. Yet sometimes bad things happen to good people. Humankind holds that we have a right to pursue happiness, and yet in practice many believe we have a right to actually obtain it and to fail to do so is viewed as a tragedy. In contemporary society many seem fixed on buying or acquiring this happiness, while the view of the stoics was that happiness was not found in earthly possessions but in the consciousness of our soul. Principles of Enlightenment-type thinking would lead to the assumption that happiness is not bestowed, but created. To accept what is given, the ‘*is*’ (i.e. materialism, instant gratification, individual interests) of today, will not yield true happiness but might help dull the senses to what is passing us by and what *ought* to be.

How does one know what he or she may be missing? Enter, reason. Reason is not only the ability to perform operations, and achieve understanding of the actual; reason allows us the opportunity to consider what may be possible. This ability forms the basis for social justice as well as scientific research. Without it, humankind would be unable to question, and could not imagine society being any other way. Only when we are courageous enough to ask the difficult questions, do we stand a chance of moving closer to *ought*. For these purposes evil spurs us on because the occurrence of evil seems so fundamentally unjust or unfair that we are forced to question why things are as they are, and not otherwise. Some might look for rigidity of mindset or dogmatic rules to apply when handling a difficult situation. Dewey described a danger in this suggesting that regardless the number of rules or laws there will always be situations to which they do not apply. To put too much stock into rules would therefore be a mistake for governing

behaviour. According to Rousseau, “calibrating the right path is a matter of judgment, which cannot be learned by rule” (as cited in Neiman, 2008, p. 207). Research conducted with very young children concluded that even in the absence of a rule, they knew it was wrong to cause harm to another (Smetana, 1981). They were able to use their judgment to determine the appropriate course of action. Nevertheless, to say rules are unnecessary is also not true. Rules give people a starting point and a standard for handling a situation. However, to teach rules and not develop judgment cannot possibly prepare individuals for every situation they may encounter in a lifetime; to say nothing of the rules that may in fact be immoral. Consider the events of WWII in Hitler’s Germany with such a perspective to illustrate the dangers in this approach. Moral clarity deals with thinking about vital ethical issues and bumps into what is often thought of as the realm of religion.

What, if any, is the relationship between morality and religion? The Enlightenment was responsible for changing the view of religion and morality, where previously it was believed that without religion there could be no morality. Much of the traditional 18th century religion, according to Neiman’s interpretation of philosophers of the day, drove good behaviour with the threat of punishment, or the possibility of reward. Following this line of thinking, humankind would be forced to believe that happiness and virtue are in fact linked as are vice and unhappiness. To suffer unhappiness would therefore be the result of one’s own actions. According to Kant, to behave in a particular manner, either for reward or fear of punishment, may be good behaviour, but it is not moral behaviour. For Kant, and I am inclined to agree, not knowing that your actions will be rewarded, or punished, is critical to moral judgment, for the motivation to act morally should be based on principles of justice (Kohlberg, 1981), welfare (Turiel, 1983; Nucci, 2001), or caring (Noddings, 2002) and not on self interest.

Looking at human nature critically can take many different perspectives. Consideration of human nature while examining its most primitive form yields some interesting learning for humankind. The work of Frans De Waal, who studied non-human primates, concluded that human morality is based in the emotional responses to the suffering of others. Non-human primates, according to De Waal, demonstrate the most elemental aspect of moral development, the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another. While Kant believed that one’s actions cannot be fully moral without a foundation in principle, it was Hume who argued that humankind is naturally endowed with concern for others. It is critical, according to Neiman, to acknowledge that both emotion and reason may have roles to play in ultimately determining action. Further, the motivation for and satisfaction in actions taken does not come from anticipated reward, but from the actions themselves.

The theme of hope is explored to illustrate the importance of state of mind in making change. Neiman explores this theme with three concrete examples. According to Kant the industrial revolution marked a turning point for humankind, giving rise to a hope that such systemic change might improve conditions for all. The gap between *is* and *ought* was expected to lessen. Since this time, there have been other signs that things are either getting better or are deteriorating drastically (dependant upon the view of the observer). Neiman cites the elimination of certain methods of torture, the abolition of slavery, and the changes in the lives of many women, as examples of what is possible if humankind believes there is progress to be made. Without such hope, the likelihood of affecting change, minimizing the chasm between *is* and *ought*, is drastically reduced.

Neiman suggests that if philosophy begins with wonder (a view advanced by Aristotle), what we should wonder about are the changes that have occurred which are now taken for granted. At some time they were of great importance to individuals who were willing to sacrifice greatly for their advancement, yet today often go un-recognized as remarkable in any way. Consider the work of abolitionists, of great scientists and explorers who sought to change the way people understood and behaved in their world. In their day, they would have faced enormous challenges in having their views recognized, including public humiliation, abandonment, even death.

The third and final section of this book focuses on the themes of good and evil. Using the story of *The Odyssey*, Neiman illustrates how nature and reason, much like pre-modern and modern heroes, are divided by significant differences. Neiman argues that in modern time what tends to be focused on more than heroes, are victims, and suggests that humankind return to a pre-modern way of thinking “where your claims to legitimacy are focused on what you’ve done to the world, not what the world did to you” (p. 316). We control our own fate and will need to struggle as heroes do. Heroes can see *is* and *ought* and must negotiate their actions between the two states. Heroes such as Odysseus are imperfect, a quality which makes them more alive and obtainable for all. Such demystification of the hero exemplifies Enlightenment thinking, encouraging humankind to rise above simple acceptance of our lot in life. I tend to agree with Neiman when she claims that if heroes are ‘other’ people who somehow possess some special quality which enables them to do exceptional things, we permit ourselves to escape our responsibility to try. If given the choice to stand up for an injustice or face death, as Neiman says, most would understand if you remained ‘seated.’

Evil, is not as foreign as we might like to believe. It is not the evil that exists in some other place or is done by some alien form that humankind needs to worry about but rather the quiet, insidious forms of evil done by individuals or groups who never really set out to be or do evil. Desire such as the want of power, lust, and luxury are all drives which can incite action. According to Neiman, we tend to judge the actions of others not on outcome, but on intent, as she illustrates the difference between how the legal system distinguishes between manslaughter and murder; both end with the death of another, but the intent of the killer is given measure in the determination of penalty. To judge one action as more ‘good’ or less evil than another where the actions are identical suggests that the soul can be judged. This, according to Kant is wrong, because in most cases people do not even know their own souls. Crimes (evil) can be committed with any number of intentions, but ultimately we are responsible for what we choose to do.

Neiman has established a dichotomous relationship between concepts. The purpose of which is to force the reader to reconcile their perspective as they view the world, past and present. Using the organizing theme of *is* and *ought*, Neiman uses examples of good and evil, hope and despair, conservative and liberal, hero and villain, modern and pre-modern, and idealism and realism to illustrate the gaps between these two states of being and creates dissonance for the reader. Readers are then required to position themselves somewhere along the continuum between the two polarities. Her intent, it would seem, is to advance the thinking of the reader such that what has occurred and is currently occurring in our world do not go unrecognized and unchallenged, but are viewed with eyes, hearts, and minds open. As adults we should not accept, according to Neiman, constrained thinking about possibility, but rather live lives fully by questioning and

demanding more from ourselves and those who would tell us there is no more to life. In fact, the only real limit to what is possible or ideal should never be our thinking, for the only real certainty is our mortality.

Neiman's work has implications for moral education now taking shape in public schools across North America in the form of character education initiatives. In order to avoid having such initiatives remain one dimensional and superficial, educators would do well to heed Neiman's warnings. Youth today need more than rules to govern, and rewards and punishments to motivate. Educators must rise above such dogmatic practices and allow for room in their pedagogy for youth to question, critically reflect on, and challenge that which they view as immoral in today's world. Youth need opportunity to explore the possibilities and to see on a regular basis ordinary heroes who do not settle for the *is* (of reality) but who go for the *ought* (of idealism). Without such courage, we are unlikely to see lasting and positive change in our world.

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