



Susan Neiman

Truth, hope and light

The language of morality has been hijacked by the religious Right — yet however shabbily its partisans may behave, argues Susan Neiman, they offer a public conception of goodness the Left forgot how to defend.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the phrase *moral clarity* entered the political lexicon from stage right. It was primarily used by supporters of the Bush administration, who saw the infamous "Axis of Evil" speech as an example of it — and not, as time has told, a blustering display of incompetence that managed to undermine the Iranian opposition, incite both Iran and North Korea to speed up their nuclear ambitions, and prepare the ground for the disastrous war in Iraq. In America, the phrase multiplied in the wake of the 2004 election, which Republicans claimed as a victory not just for their candidates, but for moral clarity itself. Voters, they said, had rejected the pale and indecisive Kerry for a man who could tell it like it is, defending values without hesitation: whether in military exploits abroad or in the culture wars back home.

For those outside America, such claims were barely comprehensible, and millions inside it were disgusted at the Bush administration's use of a phrase that turned into a travesty of both words. Was there anything moral about the number of lies and scandals that accompanied the war? Was there anything clear about a regime that practised torture with aplomb yet looked aghast on gay marriage? But to dismiss the Right's appeal to moral values is to forget what it offers. However shabbily its partisans may behave, they offer a public conception of goodness the Left forgot how to defend. Right-wing talk of moral clarity can be empty, but that is not the same as being meaningless: empty concepts remain concepts in search of an application. The Left, by contrast, has deflated the concepts themselves. Most of the voices willing to speak in universal moral terms at all now consider themselves conservative.

The Right also lacks something that may be even more important than what it has: namely, embarrassment. Its partisans may abuse words like *evil* and *hero*, but they aren't afraid to take them in their mouths. Wary of simplification, and even more wary of kitsch, the Left tends to reject not only words like *true* or *noble*, but words like *legitimate* and *progress* which were meant to replace them. If used at all, they are subject to quotation marks to put distance between the speaker and her language — in the ultimate postmodern gesture to ensure that nobody takes anything very seriously at all.

My own decision to postpone another project in order to write a book called *Moral Clarity* was equally driven by rage and hope. The rage was directed at

those who had occupied all the crucial moral territory; the hope was, by using what I had learned in moral and political philosophy, to help reclaim the territory so shamefully ceded. For the Bush administration's usurpation of moral concepts contributed to a phenomenon already at work on the Left for decades. All kinds of forces contributed to it: concern about Eurocentric assertions of universalism that were blind to other cultures, vestiges of Marxist claims that moral values were just superstructure built to obscure class interest, despair as the news from the former Soviet Union revealed an empire that was really evil. For many, though, the rhetoric coming out of the White House was the very last straw: if that was what moral values looked like, we had best forget them entirely. Some pointed out the similarities between the language of Bush and that of Bin Laden: were moral values anything but a shouting match between dogmatic and stubborn fanatics, driven by faith rather than reason?

It's an understandable reaction, but it overlooks the fact that we have moral needs. They include the need to express reverence and the need to express outrage, the need to reject euphemism and cant and call things by their proper names. They include the need to see our own lives as stories with meaning — meanings we impose on the world, a crucial source of human dignity — without which we hold our lives to be worthless. Most basically, we need to see the world in moral terms. Demands for moral clarity ring long, loud bells because it is something we are right to seek. Those who cannot find it are likely to settle for the far more dangerous simplicity or purity instead.

The first step in reclaiming moral language for progressive use is to show that while moral needs may be furthered by religion, it is not what keeps them alive. Rather, morality is grounded in the structure of reason itself. Moral inquiry and political activism start where reasons are missing. When righteous people suffer and wicked people flourish, we begin to ask why. This point is crucial for believers as well as atheists. Atheists cannot dismiss morality as easily as they dismiss religion, for moral principles are prior to religious ones. Nor can believers take faith as a substitute for moral reasoning: religion may sustain their search for moral values, but it cannot be the source of them.

The Bible itself is the first place to learn this — if we can learn to read it properly. Take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, one locus for fundamentalist warnings about fire and brimstone. In fact, the sin that did in the Sodomites was not fornication or homosexuality but the local demand to drag out and *gang rape to death* two passing strangers whom the good-hearted Lot had offered to shelter. According to some legends, the Sodomites were not simply immoral but deliberately anti-moral: gang raping one's guests was not an accidental occurrence but prescribed by Sodom's laws. In this case, the guests turned out to be angels, which proved Sodom's undoing, but whether or not you believe in angels or ancient rules of hospitality, you are likely to find the Sodomites' transgressions beyond every pale.

The most important part of the story, however, is what happens just before it. God reveals his plan to destroy the cities to his trusted servant Abraham, and Abraham talks back. *How can the God of justice destroy the just and unjust alike? What if there are fifty innocent souls in the city?* The God of justice allows that He will spare the cities if 50 good souls can be found. *But the Lord is not pedantic! Would He destroy the cities for a lack of a mere five?* Abraham bargains God all the way down to ten, and his courage is awesome. He is prepared to risk the Lord's wrath for the sake of innocent strangers he does not know, simply as a matter of principle. The story also shows us that moral judgment is not a matter of decisions made once and for all, but of

keeping your eye on distinctions. Moral reasoning is slow, specific, and seldom absolute. But if Abraham can make God stop and think about ethical judgment, none of us is ever exempt.

Abraham's sense of justice was clearly not derived from God's commandments. Is there a source on which moral judgments can draw — today, for most of us, whatever our backgrounds? In *Moral Clarity* I argued that there are roots in the Bible, for believers, and in the epics of Homer, for secular readers, which reached their best expression in the much-maligned Enlightenment. We must take back the Enlightenment from the clichés that surround it: that the Enlightenment held human nature to be benevolent and progress inevitable, faith to be a worn-out answer to the questions of the past and technology a solution to all the problems of the future. In fact, no era was more aware of the existence of evil, no era took more care in probing human limits and bounds.

The Enlightenment took aim not at reverence but at idolatry and superstition; it never believed that progress is necessary, only that it is possible. With patience, you can find some 18th-century quote to express the crudest versions of these claims; you can find second-rate thought about anything. But you needn't be a scholar to find something better; all it takes is *Candide* to recall that the standard attacks on the worst version of Enlightenment came from the heart of the Enlightenment itself. The idea that life is not as good, and the world not as simple, as we'd like to believe just might have been news to *Candide* himself, but hardly to his creator, who wrote the book as part of an Enlightenment effort to examine the world as it is. Yet critics like Isaiah Berlin and John Gray proceed as if Voltaire and his fellows had never put pen to paper.

Why turn to the Enlightenment? There is no better option. Rejections of the Enlightenment result in premodern nostalgia or postmodern suspicion; where Enlightenment is at issue, modernity is at stake. A defence of the Enlightenment is a defence of the modern world, along with all its possibilities for self-criticism and transformation. If you're committed to Enlightenment, you are committed to understanding the world in order to improve it. Twenty-first century Enlightenment must extend the work of the 18th by pointing out new dangers to freedom of thought within our own culture as well as without it, and extend social justice by expanding older attacks on injustice.

These are crucial commitments, but they are also formal ones, like the tolerance and scepticism often cited as crucial to the Enlightenment core. Scepticism and tolerance will not take us very far; while it's possible they may prevent harm, it's unlikely that they can inspire anyone to do good. Reclaiming the Enlightenment must entail reexamining other values that derive from it, and these must include at least four. One of them is the idea that human beings have equal rights to happiness on earth. Earlier ages viewed disease as a sign of divine disfavour, or poverty a condition to be remedied in heaven; only Enlightenment thinking allowed us to view them as things human beings might overcome. A second Enlightenment value is the commitment to reason — not as opposed to passion, which was as riotous during the 18th century as at any other period, but as opposed to blind authority and superstition. A third value is more surprising, but equally important: reverence for Creation is a form of gratitude, and a sign of humility: whatever you think made the world, you had better remember it wasn't you. Hope, a fourth Enlightenment value, is what drives all the others, but it is not the same as optimism. Hope is not a statement of fact but a foundation of action: if you think everything has been getting worse since the old days, you are unlikely to do much to stop the decline. If

you insist on the fundamental depravity of human nature, you are unlikely to do anything more vigorous about it than shaking your head.

The subtitle of *Moral Clarity* is *A Guide for Grown-up Idealists*. When I began writing, Barack Obama had yet to appear on the world horizon; as I write this, his campaign is being used as a model for the opposition in Iran. They are not alone in hoping that this man is a model for an idealism that is as genuine as it is mature — in Kant's terms, the ability to distinguish between what is and what ought to be, while never losing sight of each. As an American who volunteered throughout Obama's campaign I take some satisfaction in thinking that an American president might again serve as a symbol of something the world needs. But if the symbol is to be effective, all of us must rethink what moral clarity comes to in the 21st century.

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