

Susan Neiman

## Moral Clarity - Facing Gallows

Are there moral laws that bind everyone—wherever they come from, whatever they believe? The greatest philosopher of modern times walked up to this question and turned sideways, refusing to answer directly. Instead, Immanuel Kant reached for a parable.

Imagine, he says, a man who claims temptation overwhelms him whenever he passes what the 18<sup>th</sup> century discretely referred to as “a certain house”. No matter what he tells himself beforehand, when he reaches the whorehouse he has to go in. He’d like to be prudent, he’d like to be faithful; perhaps he thinks sex is one thing that doesn’t belong on the market. But no tie of love, no fear of disease or shame is stronger than the claims of the flesh. Can we understand him? Easily, says Kant. But what if a gallows were installed before the whorehouse on which he will be hung immediately after emerging from its sin-sating depths? Suddenly he discovers he can withstand temptation very nicely, thank you. For however bright ordinary desires may be—for sex or wealth or any other form of mortal pleasure—all of them pale before the desire for life itself. No life, no consumption: all the sweets of the world put together cannot weigh against that.

Let the same man be summoned before an unjust ruler, and given a choice. The ruler intends to execute an innocent subject fallen afoul of his regime, but the semblance of law demands the appearance of just procedures. Someone will write a letter denouncing the innocent, bearing false witness to a capital crime. Our roue is asked to do it. Should he refuse, the ruler will make sure he is executed himself.

As in the first case, Kant thinks it’s easy to imagine being in this fellow’s shoes. But unlike the first case, we suddenly waver: we *do not know what we would do*. Kant always emphasized the limits of knowledge, and one of the things we never know for certain is the inside of our souls. None of us is so righteous as to be sure not to crumble in the face of death or torture. Most of us probably would. But all of us know what we *should* do: refuse to write the letter though it cost our own lives. And all of us know that we *could* do just that—whether or not we would totter in the end. In this moment, says Kant, we know our own freedom, in a breath of awe and wonder. Not pleasure but justice can move human beings to deeds that overcome the strongest of animal desires, the love of life itself. And contemplating this is as dizzying as contemplating the heavens above us: with this kind of power, we are as infinite as they are.

Kant says this sort of example is simple enough to be grasped by “businessmen, women, and ten-year-old schoolboys”. Change the terms as you want to: he seems to be right. It’s a thought-experiment nearly anyone can make, and the answers are surprisingly similar. You may want to vary the example. Writing letters is easy—so easy, in fact, that *desk-murderer* became the German word for Nazi bureaucrats like Adolf Eichmann. Putting marks on paper is so removed from the violence that takes life that many people who can swallow their qualms about one could not go through with the other. When I taught this example in a Yale ethics course, one student

insisted he knew perfectly well what he'd do. He was a coward, he wanted to live, and he would sign any number of unjust letters in order to do so. Indeed, he claimed he would do anything. We fenced for awhile until I upped the ante: was he certain he could kill children, if ordered, to save his own life? With machine guns? Machetes? He wavered. We know it has happened: perhaps the most awful reports from contemporary third-world wars are those describing children who were given the choice to hack up other children, or be destroyed themselves. Some of them didn't do it.

What's the point of this example? It's the only answer the leading modern philosopher ever gave to the leading moral question philosophers are routinely asked. Is anything absolutely right, or absolutely wrong—and if so, how would I know it? Kant offers the example at a crucial juncture in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, just when readers hope he's about to show them that the moral law is absolutely true. Those hopes are disappointed. For moral principles are never true. Truth is a matter of the way the world is; morality is a matter of the way the world ought to be. The distinction between *is* and *ought*, this book will argue, is the most important one we ever draw. It structures our experience in ways even deeper than the way experience comes structured into causes and effects. If morality is never a matter of fact, trying to convince moral skeptics with objective proofs is worse than senseless. Nor should we be urged to live rightly because it's in our self-interest to do so. Such arguments leave us helpless whenever morality and self-interest part company; in the times when they don't, we don't need morality to move us.

So how do you answer the skeptic who asks why he should be moral? Kant says you do it by talking about heroes: those who risk their lives rather than resign themselves to injustice. "Here virtue is worth so much because it costs so much." Now anyone can think of false heroes: people who did the right thing for the wrong reasons, or the wrong thing for the right reasons, and died with an air of unearned glory. This kind of reflection, Kant says, belongs to the analysis of moral character that even businessmen, women and children naturally enjoy. We cannot be certain that any person in particular, in history or fiction, really acted from pure love of justice, and deflating other people's heroes is easy enough. But when we engage in such discussions each of us will imagine one person, at least, whom we believe defied death to do what was right. For that one we will reject every attempt to trivialize her motives as resentful or petty. Such examples provide a glimpse of human dignity nothing else can replace—and lift us out of the world of sense into realms more exalted.

This kind of rhetoric may make you nervous. At the very least, a plea for intoxication from the most sober of philosophers will seem outdated, a relic of the time when children were raised on tales from Plutarch's *Lives*. For the record, Kant's discussion of heroes was obsolete in 1786, and he knew it. Even Stoic circles thought they'd make less headway by emphasizing the sublimity of virtue than by underlining its advantages. Kant's kind of example does what theirs cannot: it shows beyond doubt that morality is possible. For most ordinary questions that confront us mix ethics with self-interest. Do you pay your taxes because cheating on them is wrong, or because the revelation that you hadn't could compromise your career? Paying up looks the same in both cases, and motives are the sort of things we never know for sure. Here

only life and death examples can show us that action for moral reasons is possible: when we consider a hero we have to stop short. To be sure, you can go to the scaffold with mixed motives too, but at some point doubt will end. "What's absolute," says Cornel West, "is what I'm willing to die for."

This is one thought experiment anybody can perform; ergo, the moral law. It's the universality of the experiment that carries its weight. For it's an answer to conservative critics, today as in the past, who believe the mass of humanity is driven by crude desires. Perhaps, they argue, a few great souls act on moral principles. But most of us have nothing more noble in view than bread and circuses. Our appetites for refinements of gluttony and varieties of entertainment remain nearly insatiable, and nothing else really moves us. If our lives revolve around consuming the objects of these simple passions, a benevolent despotism which manages those passions is the best form of government. We care about getting stuff, and distraction from pain; they care about getting it to us. Who could possibly complain?

This argument was used to defend despotism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then as now it depended on the premise that people don't want to be challenged, but happy. If Kant's thought-experiment works, the consequences are great. As part of the good life we want all kinds of pleasure, but we want something else as well: a sense of our own dignity that allows us to deny pleasure itself if it violates something we hold higher. Of course wanting dignity isn't the same as having it; many a sweet lazy dream of something grander remains just that. But if most of us can imagine wanting to be Kant's hero, even for a moment, then a government that appeals to our best instincts can't be dismissed out of hand. If each of us can imagine a moment in which we want to show our freedom by standing on the side of justice, each of us should work towards a world in which freedom and justice are paramount. The bread and the circuses would take care of themselves.

Each of us? Kant never traveled forty miles from his native Königsberg, and got his information about other places from books and seamen's tales. Our sense of universality is stronger. We can imagine this thought-experiment producing similar results in the most dissimilar people: anti-apartheid activists in Soweto, for example, and anti-abortion activists in Texas; kids in the Ukraine and firefighters in New York; mujahadeen and members of Parliament in Pakistan.

Pakistan isn't entirely accidental. I chose it because of all the images of Islamic fundamentalism broadcast in the West since 9/11, one from Pakistan struck me hardest. It's a photo my local paper showed of two women veiled in white cloth with holes just large enough to reveal their very thoughtful eyes. Even this is enough to reveal very different expressions. One looks down with something like sadness; her muted gaze suggests awareness of how hard her road will be. A sympathetic observer would call her wise, at least; a little imagination would call it the glance of a madonna. Her companion's gaze is another entirely. The eyes are fixed forward, up and unwavering, determined to endure whatever it takes to reach the end she sees as clearly as you see this page. Depending on your perspective, you will find her glance frighteningly fanatic—or a picture of courage. Both women wear glasses, and the newspaper caption identifies them as members of parliament, come to power as part

of a coalition of radical Islamists who in 2003 won the greatest victory in the history of Pakistan.

We know it isn't the most wretched and downtrodden who have swelled the Islamists' ranks. The opponents of Western civilization are not largely those who have been shut out of it; many new recruits are well-educated and well-off. For this near-sighted woman, imagining the logistical challenge of negotiating burka and glasses brought the point home. I still don't know how the glasses stay on, but there's no more radical way to enslave one's head from the outside than the way these women have chosen. One look at what can be seen of their faces leaves no doubt this was a choice made with open eyes.

What does it give them? Not: easy answers to the problems of life in a complex world, or some other such condescending description. Here and there a bumpkin may be consoled for any amount of misery by visions of 72 dark-eyed virgins in Paradise, or whatever the equivalent reward for female mujahadeen would be. But neither the ability to endure, nor the ability to kill and die, is normally born from such crude calculations. Rather, some forms of life serve as their own reward, for they meet deep desires not fulfilled by anything else. Forced to choose between cynicism and madness, many people will reject cynicism.

Pakistan may seem to be a special case, since the Islamist victory there was fed by anger at Musharaf's understandably unpopular government. But every case is special, one way or another, and there's no reason for opposition to corrupt military regimes to take the form of taking the veil. Against all we expected, the past decade has seen one part of the world after another reject a world-view based on the bottom line: the idea that material needs are what move us, and everything else is expendable froth. Part of what's being rejected is just hypocrisy: an international finance system that forces poor countries to open their doors to the free market while allowing rich ones to close theirs; a superpower whose commitments to democracy evaporate when dictators better suit its interests. But even where standard principles of free market capitalism and liberal democracy are actually followed, many people feel they're not enough.

Kant's gallows show that what's missing is neither esoteric nor irrational. The sense being sought is entirely comprehensible: we want to determine the world, not merely be determined by it; want to stand above the things we may want to consume. You can call this the urge for transcendence, so long as you don't call it mystical. We are born and we die as part of nature, but we feel most alive when we go beyond it. To emphasize our need for a dignity that cannot be bought or sold is not to say we cannot live without it. We can. As history all too dismally reminds us, dignity is a need of human nature we may choose to disregard. But human life gains meaning in opposition to experience: to be human is to refuse to accept the given as given.

In claiming that fundamentalist religion often meets just that need, I'm suggesting it goes much further than meets the eye. To be sure, fundamentalism fulfills needs for community that secular cultures have neither met nor extinguished. This can take very practical forms. Barbara Ehrenreich describes a Virginia church that is full every night of the week, for there

“Dozens of families and teenagers enjoy a low-priced dinner in the cafeteria; a hundred unemployed people meet for prayer and job tips at the ,Career Ministry’; divorced and abused women gather in support groups. Among its many services, MBC distributes free clothing to 10,000 poor people a year, helped start an inner-city ministry for at-risk youth in DC and operates a ‘special needs’ ministry for disabled children.”

Ehrenreich rightly compares the network of social services—and the resulting political power—such churches provide with the miniature welfare state Hamas offers needy Palestinians. She finds it particularly insidious that the Christian right advances by offering its own welfare state while attacking what public one remains, and urges the left to provide alternatives services, as it did on smaller scale in the ‘60s. I share her concerns and admire her analyses, but they miss one crucial point. Suppose we lived in a culture where soup kitchens and homeless shelters were no longer needed, where genuinely equal opportunities offered vistas to intercity youth instead of despair, where medical care was not considered a benefit but a right. We would have gone a long way to meeting fundamental human needs American culture now leaves to chance, but something basic would still be missing.

It’s often said that religion meets human needs for meaning: fixing our place in the world and telling a story that gives sense to what are often brief and painful lives. Fundamentalist religion does lend meaning, but this is too broad and general a service to give any cues about what else might do so as well. Nor is it enough to say that religious communities provide the sense of connectedness largely absent in the contemporary Western world. These claims are true enough, but the one I’ve proposed is more controversial. Secular observers view fundamentalism as a way of making believers’ lives both more easy and more passive. It’s a view that’s both condescending and dangerous, for it fails to grasp much of the fundamentalist appeal. Its religions offer rules which make some decisions easier, and no doubt that’s one reason why many people are drawn to them. But there are deeper reasons which must be faced head-on. Religion doesn’t only make people passive, by shouldering some of the burdens of decision; it makes them feel more active as well. The window of transcendence it opens onto the everyday is an injection of spirit into a world of sluggish torpor.

Metaphors have long lives, and Marx’s description of religion as the opium of the people helped mislead us all. In fact, though Marx was the first thinker to show how deeply our worldviews may be shaped by material needs, his views of religion are more complex, and less condescending, than most leftist critics who followed. Far from reducing religious needs to economic ones, Marx called the criticism of religion the first premise of all other criticism because he understood its power. Here’s what he actually says in the passage leading up to the one-liner about opium:

“Religion is the general theory of the world, its encyclopedia, its logic in popular form, its spiritualistic *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and general ground for the consummation and justification of this world....Religious suffering is at once the expression of real suffering and the protest against real suffering.

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."

Sitting in the British Library, Marx may have got his drugs wrong. On his account, religion is anything but a sedative; in fact it sounds more like cocaine. In Marx's description, religion is the force that keeps the world awake. *Heart of a heartless world* calls up love as well as courage; hearts are also sometimes seats of purity, another quality one longs for when one longs for faith. But saccharin allegories aside: anatomically speaking, the heart is the organ that keeps us alive.

Marx's judgment of the forces arrayed against religion was just as savvy as his judgment of its power. His description of what capitalism did to the world it found might, with few changes, have been written by believers in Afghanistan—or Arkansas.

"The bourgeois...drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—free trade...All that is solid, melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."

Of course this is irony, and verbal acrobatics, but it's also ambivalence. Marx's attitude towards the religious standpoint is hardly one of scorn. Something fateful was lost when bourgeois calculation replaced religious devotion, and we are right to feel bereaved. Marx's ambivalence towards the holy is echoed in contemporary critics of globalization from the left as well as from fundamentalist forces on the right. As the freedom to buy cellphones or sneakers expands from Boston to Beijing, something within us contracts; the price of this world is an absence of soul. You don't need to have a political direction to view the process with disgust, and yearning. Whether out of disgust for principles preached but not practiced, or for principles one would rather not practice at all, the cry for a heart for this heartless world grows louder every day.

It's at this point that religion and morality meet and join hands. Theirs need not be a cynical alliance. Some crude critics suggest that religion handles morality like a prod or a whip, producing the behavior it seeks through a series of bribes and threats. But this is the abuse of morality, not the essence. However often priests of one sort or another may have mobilized their flocks with promises about heaven and warnings about hell, such manipulation is political, and therefore incidental to the realms of both religion and morality. Nor does religion make moral choice transparent. Even in the ages when some faith or another was a matter of course, everyday moral decisions were never automatic. *Which* faith, and how it was to be applied to daily decisions, was anything but clear; people burned each other alive over the differences. Whatever pictures may be colored by nostalgia and longing, religion makes life neither safe nor easy.

It does make it meaningful in the way only dignity can, and this is one point where religion has deep moral roots. For those who look from the outside, religious fundamentalists deliver themselves into the hands of authority: faith offers them freedom from decisions and leaves their lives determined by someone else. Looked at

from the inside, faith itself is a choice, and it means rejecting a life determined by the rules of buying and selling that frame consumer culture. In Marx's time it made more sense to connect religion with quietism, taking the world as it is: where cultural and political frameworks were structured in religious terms, it required considerably more effort to chart a course without them. Today the balance is almost reversed: in cultures where the status quo is secular, it's religious life that demands constant choice. For those who decide to risk or take their lives, that choice becomes the highest proof of freedom. There is nothing defensible in suicide terrorism, and this is no attempt to defend it, but rather to acknowledge that some suicide terrorists act from emotions we find comprehensible, even admirable. All the more reason not to act on emotion alone. But in understanding how to end the temptation to terrorism we must find common emotional ground. As important as are proposals for improving the economic options of young people attracted by terrorism, they will not work if we cannot repopulate their dreams.

Genuine religion and morality unite in the determination to hold out for something better than the world we know—or possibly even imagine. This is the messianic impulse, but it's an impulse which insists on a messiah who never comes. Kant called one moment in Jewish thought sublime: its prohibition on images of God. The refusal to permit our imaginations to linger on anything tangible when imagining the sacred parallels the refusal to embellish morality with material advantages. Instead of making morality attractive, advantage weighs it down—when what we wanted morality to do was to make us fly.

To be human is to have needs for transcendence over the brute and shiny objects of experience, needs that both religion and morality at their best fulfill. Skeptical readers will see those needs as ways we've been duped. Joe Hill's description of religion as the promise of pie in the sky when you die is memorable enough to have captured much of the territory. But the idea that religion lulls us into enduring a miserable present for the sake of a make-believe future depends too much on the opium metaphor to stand. Rather, the urge for transcendence expresses two drives. One is to criticize the present in the name of the future, to keep longing alive for ideas the world has yet to see. The other is to prove one's own freedom, and dignity, by having a hand in bringing those ideals about. Far from being soporific or sheeplike, this is an urge to be so active it comes dangerously close to challenging the Creator Himself.

And this is just the step the suicide terrorist takes. He may start from the same willingness to sacrifice his own happiness for an idea of justice as our man before the gallows. Kant's hero, however, acts in recognition of his limits. The suicide terrorist acts not only in God's service, but in His stead.

The wish to take God's place is a natural one. It isn't the result of arrogance but of logic. Anyone who ever felt pain or rage at the thought: *this should not have happened* implies a reproach. The world is not in order, and one way or another, it ought to be made anew. Since the Book of Job, and any number of points in between, righteous men and women have longed to step in and change a piece of Creation. Their good will is in their own hands; their success depends on too many others to be entirely under control. The man refusing to sign the letter does not want to die, but to prevent an innocent man from doing so. When his power to alter an

unjust world has reached its limit, all he can do is refuse to be a part of it. This choice is so terrible that it is made very seldom, and that is as it should be. The terrorist, by contrast, refuses to acknowledge his finitude. The decisions he makes about others' lives are ones to which human beings have no right. For the only thing that even an atheist needs to know about God is that He is not us.

Now each of the three Western religions has fundamentalist, authoritarian strains. In one idiom or another they insist that being faithful means crucifying your intellect: better to believe just because it's absurd. Fundamentalists like to claim that the moral code that flows from their faith needs no intellect to follow. What the Lord wants you to do is easy to read in the good book. While they may preach that the word of God is transparent, fundamentalists need interpretation as much as anyone else. Their interpretations will focus on passages and practices that emphasize obedience, and external authority—be it the authority of the Lord Himself, or of His deputies in the clergy. Common study of the Bible or the Koran is often part of fundamentalist culture, but the zeal there is for individual witness, not individual analysis. In the end, fundamentalist authorities will deny that unadorned human reason can decide questions of right or justice or truth.

But instructions are rarely self-evident, and holy books are written in codes that must be deciphered like any others. This is not a matter of applying ancient principles which once were obvious to modern situations which are not. No law applies itself, ever. Much of ancient scholarship itself began in the need to work out which moral judgments followed from which moral claims. Thus each of the three Western religious traditions has a rationalist strain, opposed to the fundamentalist one, stretching back to the ancient religious academies where the modern notion of scholarship was shaped. The dialectical thinking practiced in the yeshivot of Babylon and Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple was the basis for the Talmud, but it influenced legal reasoning in every tradition. The fine distinctions teased out under the gothic vaults of the Sorbonne were attempts to work out Church doctrines of salvation; they affected not only our concepts of essence and accident, but of philosophical thinking to the present day. The Koranic studies still practiced in the filigreed halls of madrasas like the al-Azhar university in Cairo recall the early medieval times when the Moors brought arts and sciences to southern Europe. All these houses of learning arose in devotion, engaged in the task of making day to day sense of what followed from the texts they held sacred. Far from viewing our capacity to reason as threatening our capacity to obey God, this tradition sees thinking as its very fulfillment. (Some Jewish parables show God laughing with pleasure when His children defeat Him with a particularly good argument.) If reason is God's gift, He meant us to use it, and on this tradition our ability to make sense of the world is just one more proof of God's goodness, and hence of His glory.

Remembering these facts should stop us from dividing the world along religious and secular lines. For many rationalist religious thinkers have more in common with secular Social Democrats than with fellow believers; many a fideist is closer to postmodern nihilism than he knows. For far less important than your belief that God exists, or that He doesn't, is what you think your belief entails. Does it direct your behavior by rules and commandments that are set out before you, or does it require

you to think them through yourself? Does it require you to try to make sense of the world, or does it give up on sense itself?

Though each side will fight fiercely to show its standpoint to be the one religion really sanctions, each religion has signposts pointing both ways. The Old Testament itself is magnificently equivocal. The binding of Isaac sustains fundamentalists of every color. When a voice calls you to take your son, your only son whom you love, and journey to a distant height which will be indicated later, you saddle up your ass and do it, secure in the faith that the Lord will solve whatever problems arise on the way. And however long Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians struggle to find multiple meanings in this text, the dominant seems to be this one: Abraham's unquestioning willingness to heed God's command to sacrifice the thing he loved most is the act that qualified him to be father of what are still sometimes called the Abrahamic faiths. (Kant's comment on the passage was unequivocal: Abraham should have reflected, and concluded that anyone who asked him to do *that* cannot be God. You can tell which side he's on.)

For the other stream of each religion has its own text to draw on, and if less familiar it's not one bit less striking. Before he goes to Mount Moriah Abraham goes to Sodom and Gomorrah, where he has what rationalists hold to be his finest hour. God reveals His plan to annihilate the two cities, and Abraham speaks up. What if there are fifty innocent people among the sinners? The judge of all the earth cannot act so unjustly as to let innocent and guilty suffer alike!—The judge of all the earth agrees; if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will leave the city alone. —But surely the Lord isn't a pedant? What if the number turns out to be smaller? Would He destroy the whole city for lack of a mere five? —The answer is obvious: the Lord will save Sodom if forty-five righteous people can be found there. —Abraham quits after bargaining God down to ten, and two things about his behavior stir hearts like mine. One is its resolute universalism. Abraham's concern for the innocents of Sodom has nothing to do with kinship or tribalism, it's concern for innocents anywhere. The other is Abraham's resoluteness, period. In his concern for the innocent he's prepared to take risks. For the texts makes clear that Abraham is scared. His words are neither proud nor wheedling, but the plea of a servant towards a master who can extinguish him with a glance. "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes," is what he says when he gets the negotiation going. "Let not the Lord be angry if I go on", is what proceeds the line that bargains down to thirty.

It's striking that Abraham seems more frightened when he pleads for the unknown Sodomites than when he prepares to follow the Lord's command to kill his own son. The emotions we can follow in his behavior at Sodom show Abraham's humanity in so many senses that I'm tempted to argue for its pride of place in the canon. That's a claim you'd expect from a rationalist like me, and I have no qualms about being partisan. The Abraham who risks God's wrath to argue for the lives of unknown innocents is the kind of man who would face the gallows against an unjust sovereign. Neither his fear nor his frailty stands in the way of his own reason. He is reverent, but not deferential, for his faith is based on his moral backbone, not the other way around. He is, in short, an Enlightenment hero. As Kierkegaard taught us, the Abraham who takes his son to Mt. Moriah has left ethics and Enlightenment behind. I'll defend the hero at Sodom any day, and could look for clues to call him more central than the man of blind faith who follows. These are the kinds of Biblical

passages which lead some religious people to argue that God cares more about goodness than ritual, and values conscience more than compliance. But for the moment, there's a more fundamental point. Both stories are deeply a part of our repertoire, anchored firmly in the very first book of the Bible on which so many others depend. Even for those who believe in it, Biblical authority won't help here. They have to decide how the book should be read.