

## EVIL LOST AND FOUND

*Jennifer L. Geddes*

Delbanco, Andrew. *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.

Adams, Marilyn McCord. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

### *Introduction*

The number of books on evil has been increasing rapidly, especially in recent years. Choosing which ones to highlight in this review was a challenging task, but I decided on two very different works, each exemplifying a distinct facet of the study of evil—in fact, the two books under consideration could hardly be more different: One suggests that we have lost the sense of evil; the other argues that an answer to the theological problems raised by evil can be found. One is a book of history, narrative, and cultural analysis, written from a secular, liberal perspective; the other a combination of analytic philosophy and Christian theology. One focuses on how a culture understands evil; the other on how individuals who have suffered evil might come to understand their experiences. At issue in one is the spiritual health of a culture; at issue in the other is the possibility of individual belief in God in the face of evil. And yet, despite these major differences, both books suggest that how we think about evil is fundamental to the ways we understand our selves, our communities, our societies, and our world.

*Evil Lost: The Death of Satan*

The work of this book is therefore to think historically about the shrinking range of phenomena to which accusatory words like “evil” and “sin” may still be applied in contemporary life, and to think about what it means to do without them. I have written it out of the belief that despite the shriveling of the old words and concepts, we cannot do without some conceptual means for thinking about the sorts of experiences that used to go under the name of evil. (9)

In *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, Andrew Delbanco argues that “a gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it” (3). In fact, he argues, “the repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak” (3). The newspapers are full of accounts of atrocities happening across the globe. Television offers us up-close images of far-away wars, intimate shots of the victims of anonymous crimes, friendly interviews with serial murderers, and talk shows that are designed to display the worst sorts of hostilities that those who used to love one another have grown to have. Horror movies bring large audiences to theatres, and crime novels line bookstore shelves. We have a growing fascination with images of evil at the same time that we find it harder and harder to speak about evil. Our ability to think about evil, to confront it in such a way that we take it seriously, resist it, and work towards preventing it, is, Delbanco argues, extremely deficient. Citing a recent book that described mass murderers, such as Stalin and Hitler, as suffering from “streaks of disorder,” Delbanco exclaims, “Why can’t we call them evil?” (4). *The Death of Satan*, he tells us, is about “how this crisis of incompetence before evil came about and how it has made itself felt in the United States” (3).

*The Death of Satan* traces the decline of the meaningfulness of the term “evil” in the moral discourse of the American public, or, in more metaphorical terms, it tells the story of Satan’s death. This

“national spiritual autobiography” presents a history of the changes in how Americans have understood evil, a history of American moral life from “The Age of Belief” to “Modern Times.” In “The Age of Belief,” Satan was a live and active figure. But, with the rise of faith in reason, belief gave way to skepticism, at least where Satan was concerned, such that “the devil was being reduced to something that educated men could not believe in. This was the beginning of the end of the devil as a meaningful symbol of evil” (64). This skepticism, however, did not extend to Americans’ understanding of human nature: while belief in Satan’s existence decreased, faith in the goodness and unlimited potential of human nature increased. Rising individualism transformed ambition and pride, once evils to be resisted, into the crowning virtues of the self-sufficient individual.

The Civil War marked a turning point away from a complete loss of the economy of good and evil. The glaring evil of slavery brought the subject of evil to the forefront of moral discussions. Delbanco notes that it was Lincoln “who did most to retrieve and renew the dormant power of the symbols of good and evil that had been slipping out of public life” (131). Rather than demonizing the South, Lincoln suggested that the evil of slavery was something that Americans had to confront as a national sin:

Lincoln’s idea of evil was extremely demanding—as it had been since Paul and Augustine first refined it into a theological formulation. It required every prospective believer to come to terms with himself, because, as Lincoln knew and said, *no* American was uncontaminated by the racist history of the Republic. (134)

But this conception of evil as sin, as something in which “I” or “we” take part, gave way to the view of evil as having to do with others. The trauma of the Civil War left many with the belief that “the world was run by chance” (143), not divine providence, and “in what amounted to a new kind of paganism, the concept of evil devolved into bad luck, and ‘good luck’ became the American benediction” (153). The notion of sin was lost along with belief in prov-

idence. American culture became one of panic and scapegoating. Evil was the other; and the other was evil, whether he was foreign, black, un-American, or “unfit.” Delbanco argues that the connection of evil with the other is related to the horrors of the Salem witch trials, slavery, racism, the eugenics movement, the Holocaust, and McCarthyism.

Modern times, Delbanco suggests, have been characterized by a loss of transcendence and providence, the increase in scapegoating and blame, and a rising culture of irony. While scapegoating is moral energy turned towards an evil purpose, Delbanco sees irony as evacuating all moral energy. Both extremes lead to an inability to grapple with the reality of evil. Delbanco is worried that American culture simply oscillates between these two extremes. Concerning the culture of irony, he asks:

Can irony yield any sense of evil? Is the ironist capable of making discriminations of value? Or is he condemned to live in a continuous world of morally indistinguishable actions and events, in which all ideas are designated ideologies?...In the face of some new Stalin or Hitler, is it possible to shake off the lethargy induced by irony and rise to the fight? History does not encourage an affirmative answer to these questions....Without reverence for something, there can be no proscriptions—and it should be clear enough to any observer of contemporary culture that we are short on both. Irony has proven to be a more potent solvent of our erstwhile beliefs than any contending belief....Its energy is negative. (210-211)

In a culture of irony, saturated with images of evil, how can we resist evil? The preponderance of images of evil anesthetizes us to evil, and the culture of irony evacuates any sense of responsibility or moral urgency that such images might raise in us. If we no longer think that there is any foundation on which to judge something evil, how can we proscribe certain actions, much less fight against them? And how can we affirm the good, a vision of the future towards which to

work, an understanding of good character towards which to strive, without an understanding of what sorts of things to leave out, to avoid, to fight against?

While Delbanco's analysis of American *public culture* is accurate, it is important to note that most Americans do not live by irony, but rather maneuver their way through the world with a moral system informed by particular religious traditions. Delbanco tells us that he has "left these people out of this book—because the story [he has] tried to tell is the story of the advance of secular rationality in the United States, which has been relentless in the face of all resistance" (221). Delbanco's use of the word "we" is problematic. When he suggests that "whether we welcome or mourn this loss, it is the central and irreversible fact of modern history that we no longer inhabit a world of transcendence" (220), he forgets that many of the "we" (if it is really to refer to "Americans") *do* see themselves as inhabiting a world of transcendence. While secular liberals "acknowledge that no story about the intrinsic meaning of the world has universal validity" (221), they should also acknowledge that a large number of Americans disagree with them.

This diversity of beliefs in the United States is particularly important to note, especially given Delbanco's identification of an American cultural dialectic in which we seem to move between, on the one hand, pouring out our moral energies against an evil other—a fundamentalist demonizing that seems to characterize both sides of contentious debates, such as those on abortion, in which each side sees the other as evil and uses extreme rhetoric to prove it—and, on the other hand, withdrawing into an ironic stance of non-involvement and smug self-absorption. As Delbanco himself notes, the division between those who believe in some sort of transcendence and those who are committed to secular rationalism is a potential source of great unrest in this country:

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, we are, I believe, dividing between two sensibilities that correspond to belief and irony. The conflict between these two

sensibilities has, I believe, more potential for rancor and ferocity than any of the preceding oppositions. (223)

But Delbanco is hopeful that these two sides may work together in renewing a language of evil that might serve us in our efforts to prevent and resist it. He suggests that there “may be reason to hope for a cooperative intellectual venture between religion and science that may lead to a revival of serious moral thinking, in which the category of evil might once again have meaning” (228). Just what form this cooperative intellectual effort might take is unclear. And it is at this point that the book’s limitations are made clear.

Delbanco’s book is a wonderfully written and perceptive diagnosis of a current cultural crisis in the face of evil, but its constructive offerings are slim. Delbanco has little to offer in the way of solutions. Strangely enough for a self-professed secular liberal, he suggests that we revisit the Judeo-Christian notion of sin and the Augustinian view of evil as privation—that is, evil as an absence, lack, distortion of the good. Delbanco admits that the idea that “sin is finally best understood as a failure of knowledge—a lack, an obtuseness, a poverty of imagination” (232) may seem a meager offering, may seem “pathetically inadequate, even offensive” (232), in the face of twentieth-century atrocities, but he thinks that such a conception of evil resists both the temptation to demonize the other and the temptation to withdraw from grappling with evil. When we recognize our own potential for evil, Delbanco argues, we are less likely to look for it in the face of others; and, conversely, when we fail to acknowledge our own potential for evil, we leave ourselves open to be overtaken by evil. He tells us that his

driving motive in writing [this book] has been the conviction that if evil, with all the insidious complexity which Augustine attributed to it, escapes the reach of our imagination, it will have established dominion over us all. If the privative conception of evil continues to be lost between liberal irony on the one hand, and fundamentalist demonizing on the other, we shall have no way

of confronting the most challenging experiences of our private and public lives. (234)

It is unclear, however, just how the view of evil as privation, divorced from the religious traditions in which it makes sense, can give us the ability or reason to confront a new Stalin or Hitler. And what exactly Delbanco means here by the “reach of our imagination” is one of the challenges of the book. What would it mean for our imaginations to have “grasped” evil?

And yet, Delbanco himself is proof that we—even “we secular liberals”—have not altogether lost the sense of evil. His book has a compelling tone of moral urgency to it. He is worried about the world his children will inherit and believes that how we think about evil is constitutive of that world. And precisely because of its tone, the book suggests that that the situation is, perhaps, not as dire as he makes out.

*Found: Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*

My central thesis in this book is that horrendous evils require defeat by nothing less than the goodness of God. My strategy for showing how this can be done is to identify the ways that created participation in horrors can be integrated into the participants’ relation to God, where God is understood to be the incommensurate Good, and the relation to God is one that is overall incommensurately good *for the participant*. (155)

While Delbanco focuses on a general cultural trend—our waning resources for responding to evil—Marilyn McCord Adams, in *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, explores what a particular religious tradition has to offer in response to the question: How can God be good given that there is so much evil in the world? And while Delbanco suggests that we need a cultural language of evil, one that can be used by Americans in confronting the worst sorts of

things that people suffer and do to one another, Adams attempts to provide a language of evil through recourse to the resources of the Christian faith. At stake in Adams' book is not the ability to chart a moral landscape or to judge the health of a society, but rather the possibility of belief in the goodness of God in the face of evil.

Adams provides the reader with helpful summaries of the major arguments that have been presented over the last several decades on the problem of evil, pointing out the connections and disagreements among them and between them and her own. For this reason alone, the book will be very useful to anyone interested in philosophical discussions of the problem of evil. Her own argument is rich in detail and multi-stranded; it draws deeply on the resources offered by numerous areas of study, including philosophy, theology, anthropology, and psychology. This is due in part to her belief that it is not possible to find one morally sufficient reason as to why God permits evil; only partial reasons can be found, but together these partial reasons give sufficient evidence to show that belief in the goodness of God is not irrational.

Adams describes herself as writing in the two traditions of the philosophy of religion and Christian philosophy, and her book displays the virtues and limitations of each. The book's attention to detail and conceptual clarity, characteristic of analytic philosophy, make it challenging and provocative, though its prose style can be, at times, tedious. It provides Christians with both rich resources for responding to the problem of evil and a provocative theology of the afterlife; however, the argument is based on assumptions that those who are not Christians do not believe, limiting the usefulness such an argument has for those outside the Christian faith.

Adams suggests that there are three major problems with current philosophical discussions of evil, all having to do with their high level of abstraction. First, these discussions consider evil in general—the mere fact of evil—rather than particular sorts of evil, especially the worst sorts of evil. Adams suggests that “our philosophical propensity for generic solutions—our search for a single explanation

that would cover all evils at once—has permitted us to ignore the worst sorts of evil in particular” (3). The second problem, a corollary to the first, is that these discussions fail to confront the problem of evil in individuals’ lives and instead deal with evil as a global concern. Furthermore, they seek either to disprove or prove the existence of a generic god, rather than a particular god believed in by followers of a particular religious tradition. Referring to J. L. Mackie, who worked out some of the strongest arguments against belief in God, Adams notes that

it would be a hollow victory for the believer to stop with showing that the God that Mackie doesn’t believe in (essentially omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good in Mackie’s sense) could coexist with evils, if that God is not the one the believer confesses. (13)

A fourth problem Adams finds in most philosophical discussions of evil is their failure adequately to take into account just how vast the difference is between Divine and human agency, and thereby, to understand properly the relationship between humans and God and between evils and the goodness of God.

In contrast to these abstractions in relation to the kind and scope of evil and the nature of God, and in contrast to the misconstrual of Divine agency, Adams proposes to show how one might believe in the goodness of the Christian God given the “horrendous evils” that happen to individuals. By “horrendous evils” Adams means

evils the participation in which (that is, the doing and the suffering) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole. The class of paradigm horrors includes both individual and massive collective suffering....examples include the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of person-ality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, child abuse of

the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas. (26)

Adams argues that the goodness of God must be something that the very individuals who suffer these horrendous evils can affirm, something that they themselves experience. She does not argue that in the end the good of eternity will outweigh all the evils that have occurred in the world—a sort of happy mathematics in which the positive outweighs the negative. Global-good-over-global-evil arguments are open to the charge that they justify the suffering of some people for the benefit of others and justify the sacrifice of some people for the sake of others. Instead, Adams argues that after death, or “post-mortem,” to use Adams’ phrase, each individual, including the very individuals on whom the worst evils have been inflicted, will come to see his or her suffering “defeated” by the goodness of God.

Exactly what Adams means when she suggests that evil will be “defeated” is hard to figure out. She means at least that God will restore and heal the broken person and that the individual will come to see a positive aspect to his or her suffering. God renarrates an individual’s life story such that he or she can see the evil suffered as part of a good whole. Adams suggests that it is

straightforward to credit God with [the] superlative imagination needed to make sense of horrors that stump us, and to think of the meaning-making God as also the Teacher Who coaches us to recognize and appropriate objective meanings already (Divinely) given, Who heals and helps us to make new meanings ourselves. (82)

Adams proposes that we think of the relationship of God to humans as that like a mother to her infant: the difference in agency is just as vast, and the abilities of the individual to comprehend his own actions or his environment, when considered in relation to God’s, are just as limited as a baby’s are in relation to its mother. The goodness of God is so good, so beyond our possibility to quantify good-

ness, that it can outweigh and “defeat” evil.

Adams’ argument is extremely complex and nuanced—this short review cannot begin even to chart an outline of it, but can only highlight its main thrust—but there is one element of it that is glaringly troublesome: Adams erases the difference between perpetrators and victims of evil. According to Adams, both the child who was raped and the adult who raped her come to see a positive aspect to their participation in evil, both experience the goodness of God in such a way as to “defeat” their participation in evil, and both see their participation in evil as part of the good unity of their lives. Here the word “participation” serves a sinister purpose, in that it erases and ignores the difference between inflicting evil and suffering evil. Adams tells us that “the morally innocent participate in horrors both as victims and as perpetrators” (125). The problem with this statement is that unless the term “morally innocent” is a meaningless phrase (in which case it should not be used at all), it cannot be ascribed to perpetrators of horrors. Adams’ mother-infant analogy reflects her sense that the evils that seem so horrifying to us here will post-mortem come to be seen, in the light of God’s great goodness, as a child’s mistake. A god who rewrites the history of an individual’s life such that his active torture of a child is understood to be the foolish mistake of a vulnerable, immature human, is a god who, at least according to this reader, does not care about justice.

Though I think it falters on its absorption of the demands of justice into a therapeutic logic of post-mortem healing, Adams’ argument is an important contribution to recent philosophical and theological discussions on the problem of evil. Her suggestions that specific evils (and the worst kinds of evils) be considered, that the value of each individual life not be overlooked, that the god under consideration be one that is not the construction of philosophy but one in which individuals actually believe, that anthropomorphizing tendencies be resisted when discussing at least the Christian God—all of these are welcome corrections to discussions of generic evils and a generic god.

*Conclusion*

Though they have written extremely different books, Adams and Delbanco both grapple with the grip that evil has over our lives—whether it causes us to question our belief in God or leads us to oscillate between finding scapegoats, on the one hand, and ignoring the suffering and injustices around us, on the other. Both suggest that resisting evil involves careful and sustained thought, and both are themselves role models in such an endeavor. Evil is not something that we will “figure out,” but it is certainly something that we must be continually in the process of preventing, confronting, and resisting. Whether one agrees with Delbanco’s cultural diagnosis or embraces Adams’ answer to the problem of evil, it is hard not to think that we are better off for the ways that their attempts to think about evil encourage and challenge us to take evil seriously.