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"Brilliant, passionate, erudite and beautifully written. Stunning and moving ethical interpretation of the history of the concept of evil in American private and public life from the first settlers to the present."-- Wendy Doniger, The New York Times Book Review.

The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil Details

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joel says

"...the story I have 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."

So says Andrew Delbanco... 14 pages from the book's conclusion. Which is to say, the title and subtitle of the book are a little misleading.

Granted, the history of secular rationality in our society indubitably concerns itself with the rejection of the ideas of transcendent good (God) and transcendent evil, both internal (sin) and external (Satan). And to these topics Delbanco certainly speaks, but perhaps not to the degree one might expect. (For a book with 'Satan' in the title, there's not actually a whole lot about the devil himself.)

Instead, what we seem to have here is a snapshot history acquired through the letters (records, biographies, poetry and prose) of American history of our society's struggle to rid ourselves of the notion of evil altogether. I say "struggle" because the rejection of the concept of evil seems to have revealed at least two descendant consequences that must be addressed: first, the rejection of evil carries with it the rejection of good. When people chuck Satan, they chuck God, as well. Second, it leaves people completely ill-equipped to adequately deal with evil when they are forced to face it. After all, insisting that a thing doesn't exist in no way means that it doesn't actually exist. So, eliminating the category from the secular American mind has in no way done away with the essence of the thing. This has turned out to be, at various times and in various ways, a very serious problem indeed for secular society (a problem that Delbanco spends most of his time detailing).

For instance, Delbanco quotes Robert Wright from his book *The Moral Animal*:

"The concept of 'evil' doesn't fit easily into a modern scientific worldview. Still, people seem to find it useful, and the reason is that it is metaphorically apt. There is indeed a force devoted to enticing us into various pleasures that are (or once were) in our genetic interests but do not bring long-term happiness to us and may bring great suffering to others. You could call that force the ghost of natural selection. More concretely, you could call it our genes. If it will help to actually use the word *evil*, there's no reason not to."

To the secular mind, evil really isn't a "thing", but rather a genetically outdated idea, a concept, and one upon which, Delbanco himself claims, "the health of society depends". The secularists seem to have found themselves squarely in the middle of another dilemma: good and evil can't be substantive or personified "things" (they rejected those categories long ago), but we can't (and shouldn't) rid ourselves of the language they necessitate, because to do so would have negative effects on society.

So, instead, they will attempt to have their cake and eat it, too. Secularism rejects the actual notions of good, evil, sin, God, and accountability to an ultimate authority, but must hypocritically retain the language of all of these things in order to function in a world in which real evil is still abundantly evident. It reminds one of the militant atheists who can't resist the urge to use words like "gifted", "built", and even "designed" to describe organisms they insist came into existence solely by non-intelligent chance. At the end of the day, secular worldviews are not compatible with secular language because the experience of human life refuses to permit it.

The paltry conclusions of secularism notwithstanding, there are some really, really valuable takeaways in this book. While Delbanco too often insists at traveling down rabbit holes, he does so in a way that is well-written and full of interesting & valuable observations. To be sure, the history of secular American thought in regards to transcendent good and evil is an eye-opening and illuminating one, and certainly helps to explain plenty of the dynamics of modern life (I certainly found it apropos to be reading this book in the midst of the 2016 election cycle.) And, despite my criticism, Delbanco remains convinced that the so-called "death of Satan" has had profoundly negative effects on the whole of American life.

In the end, Delbanco's study is a worthwhile one. Humans continue to try to throw off the shackles of what they sense to be the oppressive and unfair hand they've been dealt. The tension between the unfettered desires of human nature and what we sense to be the dynamics of good & evil does not seem to be one humanity has the power within itself to resolve. The Enlightenment (out of which the very idea of America was born) brought with it the notion that humankind, if given enough time and strength of will, can solve its own problems. What we still seem hesitant to consider, however, is that we ourselves are the problem. Humanism, of course, rejects that idea outright. But what reason, if not simple arrogance, do they have for doing so? Given our history, why do we insist on seeing ourselves in so marvelous a light?

Delbanco himself sees in the maintaining of the idea of evil within society, "the miraculous paradox of demanding the best of ourselves". (I'm not sure whether or not to assume a pun given the use of 'miraculous', but, then again, we know what he thinks about using language for which his worldview allows no basis.) This, to me, seems to be the heart of the problem. Delbanco ends the book unsure of whether or not evil is best characterized as in- or extrinsic, but he's confident that believing in it has the paradoxical effect of humanity demanding the best from itself. But, the best of humanity - as both history and Delbanco's book so adequately showcase - has done precious little at all to solve the problem of real evil. If the best conclusion we can reach from all of this is that keeping the idea of Satan alive at least gives people impetus to do their best, we are doing nothing more than putting a band-aid on a malignant tumor.

And Satan will stand to the side, smugly laughing as the monitor slowly ticks away to a flatline.

Lobug says

This was a hard book to read. It was very disgusting and disturbing in a lot of places- but I think in a way that was how it needed to be. Delbanco definitely makes his point well. I can only give it 3 stars b/c I really did not enjoy it at all- but I do think it was well written, and information that needs to get out there. The perspective is quite different from mine, as the book approaches the idea from a purely secular perspective. I appreciated the perspective difference. I think it is quite accurate, and rather scary b/c of that.

I can't really recommend that anyone read this- as I said, I had a hard time with it- but I do think it is important information that needs to be known particularly by the Christian public. I just wish it was possible to get the information and the point across without all the gross-ness. But I guess that just comes with the subject matter.

Brad says

Brilliant analysis and survey of the problem without a clue as to a final solution.

Full of illustrations and insights as he traces the rise and fall of Satan (evil) from the first century to ours. Really helpful and persuasive, but alas only descriptive.

Dora says

Perhaps I came to it at the wrong time, but all the glowing reviews couldn't prevent my slogging through the text.

Kate Davis says

(Notes for my own reference:)

Throughout: sin and evil are used interchangeably (annoying).

Intro: p16: need to renew, not restore, our conceptions

Ch1: past Satan as pride and as center-less -- present tho undetectable

Ch2: evil changed to madness; psychological explanations

Ch3: we value "self," which we believe requires cost of others; limited good mentality

Ch4: superstition/chance/luck replace any order/providence

Ch5: fear of annihilation leads to panic and scapegoats. evil is whatever is foreign, native, abnormal

Ch6: irony; context excuses everything, so there can be no good or evil. there are only explanations or excuses, no responsibility.

James says

IN our times it seems that Satan has disappeared, but in this fascinating work Delbanco discusses differing views Americans have held of Satan throughout history. The book is divided into two parts, "The Age of Belief" and "Modern Times". In part one he focuses on early America with analyses of the thoughts of religious leaders like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. He begins part two with aspects of evil in the Civil War Era and moves into the twentieth century with commentary on thinkers like Niebuhr, Trilling, and Sontag. Throughout there are instructive and enlightening examples from authors including Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and others. As always Andrew Delbanco brings his learned and lucid approach to literature and ethical thought. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of ideas in America.

Deboux says

An interesting examination of the destructive effects of irony.

Pat Burke says

A disappointing book. His proposal is to find a root for "evil", as he studies the varied ways in which people have explained it through the ages.

His thesis seems to be that, belief in Satan (evil personified) having died, evil becomes inexplicable for people. For some it is fate, for others, chance, for others again simply other persons, classes, nations...

His philosophical basis for evaluating all of this seems very weak. He tends to see evil as the simple absence of good (what he describes as the augustinian idea). And thus he tends to identify "sin as ignorance" (232).

He fails to consider that [moral:] evil or sin ultimately has its roots not only or necessarily in ignorance, but above all in the will.

"Free will", "conscience", "repentance", "forgiveness", do not appear in his index; nor are they treated in the main text.

Bruce Morton says

Andrew Delbanco's careful survey of American literature and society numbs. His research is telling and his command of English captivates. It is hard to break away from this book. If Delbanco has no answer for evil as mere social current in America, he has at least told us that there is a dangerous waterfall ahead. A must read for Christians.

Mark says

After a slow opening third that covers the early history of Puritanism in America, this book picks up speed, and I couldn't put it down for the last two-thirds. Delbanco makes a convincing case that the root of America's current anything-goes secular pop culture lies in our inability to find a moral yardstick as viscerally compelling as Satan vs. God. Though the vast majority of Americans still profess belief in God, we are clearly living in a post-Christian society, thus the outrage of so-called Christian fundamentalists. Delbanco doesn't pass any moral judgments, but he does make extremely cogent observations about what happens when an old moral system fades without giving birth to an accepted new one. A really fun read.

James Murphy says

This is the kind of book, whether fiction or nonfiction, I try to stock my tbr pond with, one that doesn't answer all my questions or claim to, but opens new doors enabling me to find my own answers and make

conclusions. This is a book about how our perceptions of evil have changed over the course of our history. Delbanco begins by describing how the Satan of colonial times was a very real presence because he was close within the narrow world of our forefathers. Being a part of each individual, Satan, sin, and evil was personal and frightening. Responsibility for control of sin and evil, always present, was forced on the individual. Gradually these burdens on the self were softened by time and liberal ideas in circulation during the time of revolution here and on the continent. The sense of evil with the most impact in our early history was, Delbanco explains, slavery. Its nature and opposition to it presented a basic conflict of good versus evil. The watershed event seems to have been the Civil War. Emphasis on God's providence had already become less influential. The war quickly gave preeminence to the idea that evil was more a matter of chance. During those years the weakened idea of Satan and sin as causes for payment for a life less than good began to give way to sin less substantial because religion had lost authority within society. The shift away from the church has continued, accelerated as the sense of evil became more and more to be perceived as outside the self and therefore something less people could believe in. The 2d half of the book Delbanco devotes to modern times and how the concept of evil migrated from the church into greater society, with little theological flavor to speak of. Surprisingly he spent little time discussing the wars or the totalitarian horrors of the early and mid-century. Emphasis is placed on the ecological warnings of Rachel Carson and the nuclear concerns of John Hershey and others. In our secular time evil is represented as the Holocaust, pollution, racial discrimination, nuclear weapons, and poverty. I noted the book predated 9/11 and probably wasn't timely enough to include the genocides of the mid-90s. Or even some novels focused on evil, like those of Cormac McCarthy. He explains that the emphasis on the above as evils has resulted because "our language has been evacuated of religious metaphor." But he cautions that human beings can't manage without any metaphor at all. In fact, Delbanco says he suspects the concept of sin may be bred into human nature and therefore necessary for human happiness. He stops short of saying religion, or Christianity, is failing because there is no hatred to offset a religion of love. He does say that evil has failed because it's become a social force rather than religious. Meanwhile, at last report, Islam is flourishing.

Charlene Mathe says

Andrew Delbanco is such a master of American Studies that he is able to thread a single topic, in this case the character (or caricature) of Satan the devil, through 400 years of history and literature, illustrating with events and authors drawn from his vast knowledge. All the while, his writing is so smooth and accessible that I want to stand and applaud what I think society intends in supporting institutions of higher education. My response to his analysis of Satan and "the death of Satan," is that his scope does not permit consideration of Satan as a reality. When I look at evil, I see natural/human evil and I see supernatural evil that overtakes the natural world like cancer overtakes the natural body. Examples are the mushrooming of Nazism after WWI; and now, the metastasis of political jihad around the world. It is reported today that terrorists drawn into the Syrian civil war are drinking the blood of their victims, and worse. To me, this behavior goes beyond human evil, and is fanned by a supernatural source. I wonder what Delbanco would think about this. Who could have imagined it when his book was published, almost 20 years ago!

Gaylord Dold says

Books Discussed:

The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil by Andrew Delblanco (Farrar, Straus and

Giroux, New York 1995)

The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty by Simon Baron-Cohen (Basic Books Perseus Group, New York 2012)

After the mass shooting (according to some estimates the 555th mass shooting of America's year 2017) at a Baptist Church in Texas, Governor Abbott, when asked what should his citizens be doing now, answered, "Look to the Lord." The Texas Attorney General had more specific thoughts. Texas gun laws were ambiguous about open and concealed carry in churches. He thought that people should take their guns to church and that Texas law should unambiguously allow them to do so. Asked about what causes such mass gun casualties (remember, this is just four weeks after a gunman killed 59 and wounded about 500 in Las Vegas), the head of Texas Carry thought that riots and disrespect for police was the answer.

All that is stupid nonsense of course. But the problem of evil in the world is not nonsense. Now that we inhabit a full-bore gun culture (no pun intended), we Americans are sunk in perpetual foreign wars, subjected to news of deaths that most cultures would be shocked by, and numbed by constant hate to the point that our President (Trump) says only that "now is not the time" to talk about it. The President does, however, sometimes call mass shooters "degenerate" or "evil", succumbing to non-reflexive instinct in a search for either natural ("degenerate") or transcendent ("evil") explanations. One thing the President cannot do is to look inside himself; nor, it seems, can many of us. But, what is it about the culture surrounding these horrible events that gives rise to mass shootings and gun violence in general?

The two books under consideration here do look inside "us" to examine the culture of evil and cruelty. Andrew Delblanco's superb book "The Death of Satan" is a highly readable survey, by Columbia University's Professor of Humanities, of the literary, social and cultural landscape surrounding America's engagement with the Devil and how American thinkers and writers have come to grips with the ever-present history of war, torture, murder, and other forms of human cruelty. Delblanco's basic premise is that: "A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it." Citing a "crisis of incompetence before evil", Delblanco traverses the centuries from Puritanism to Science, and finds that the Devil has disappeared and that Americans, "having discarded the old words and symbols" have arrived "at an unprecedented condition of inarticulate dread."

Those of us interested in the present debate about the Gun Culture (not about guns, but about an entire culture addicted to guns and other violence) can hardly ignore the fact that neither religion nor science can adequately explain what is happening in our churches, schools, nightclubs, workplaces, streets and homes. Delblanco discusses a wide array of writers and thinkers—Emerson, Melville, Cotton Mather, Hemingway, Lincoln, Kierkegaard, Primo Levi, Dewey and Lippman, to name just a few. "Getting a handle" on evil, as Delblanco argues, has been a major theme in American literature and art. These days, Delblanco would say that we as a culture have lost our mutual ability (as a society) to agree on any terms of transcendence for our shared values. Gun advocates argue that we need more guns to combat the guns in the hands of "evil doers". Some argue that we need regulation. Some might raise their hands in surrender. But make no mistake, Delblanco's wonderful book is a reminder about how much we've lost to violence and evil when a disappeared Devil can compose such a score and have us all dancing to his tune from somewhere off the stage.

While Delblanco's "Death of Satan" is an invaluable book for those interested in America's historical thinking about evil (and a book that could stimulate much useful debate), Simon Baron-Cohen's "The Science of Evil" rejects transcendental or metaphysical speculation in favor of a strictly scientific explanation of evil, or what Baron-Cohen (a Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at Cambridge)

calls “empathy erosion”. “Empathy is not the only component that contributes to cruelty” Baron-Cohen writes, “but...it is the final common pathway.” Empathy erosion is, in scientific terms, the only thing about “evil” that is measurable or observable, and thus the only thing that can be reasonably discussed as a causal factor in any kind of cruel act.

Baron-Cohen describes the considerable research done into the ways and means behind how some people become capable of cruelty and “whether the loss of affective (emotional) empathy “inevitably has this consequence.” Cohen’s book describes the abundant research results from neurobiology and gene dynamics to take a close look at the medical conditions leading to a loss of empathy. At issue is the behavior of psychopaths, sociopaths, and narcissists, who demonstrate a “Zero-Negative” empathy level, meaning that each of these categories of persons suffer from medical illnesses that disallow them from recognizing the emotions of other people. Along the way, Cohen discusses people diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and Autism, “Zero-Positives” who have a affective connections to other’s emotions, but who cannot cognitively process “other minds”.

Cohen’s book leaves a barren impression, though its science is undoubtedly correct. But as an explanation for “evil in the World”, science falls short, at least emotionally, given that “cruelty” is only one limited kind of evil. Zeroing in on individuals who lack affective empathy (even if this can be observationally and scientifically proven) leaves out of the equation, for example, all those “good Germans” who watched the Jews disappear from their towns and villages, quietly observed them being marched to the trains, and gazed on as their ashes rose up as smoke out of tall chimneys all over Germany and Eastern Europe. Those were the Germans who loved their children, went to church, fed the dog, and listened to Mozart.

These good Germans have a lot in common with we good Americans who all stand up during the national anthem. We’d best start asking ourselves and each other the right questions.

Maggie Boyd says

At the end of this book the author tells us: My driving motive in writing it 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 ironay 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.

The privative conception of evil is at the heart of Mr. Delbanco's message. The idea that evil can be determined by the individual makes the subject matter so personalized that it no longer has any meaning or definition. This factor then makes it impossible to talk to each other, something we see more and more of in current day politics. One man sees immigrants as hordes set to destroy us, armed with rocks that can kill or injure the people defending a righteously ordained border. Another hears of those soldiers at the border and is sickened by the fact they have orders to fire on desperate people armed only with the stones they've found laying on the ground. Where is the evil here? Each will tell you it is within the other. Each believes in the rightness of their own thinking.

Pulling away from private feelings and beliefs, Satan and evil and their counterparts good and God give us a

higher authority to lean upon, someone against whom we can check our darkest impulses. Does that always work? Of course not. If it did we would inhabit a very different planet since our ancestors, who firmly believed in both, also struggled to reach consensus. The author argues that they did have a bit of advantage of us, however, since they had definitions for these terms whereas we seem to constantly be reinventing them as we go along.

This is not a religious treatise per se, though it does utilize religious concepts. It is however, a very thought provoking read. I've highlighted large portions of the text and plan to review those over the next few days and weeks as I try to wrestle with the concepts presented here. A bit of a pedantic read but I found it ultimately very worth the effort.

Nathan says

A thoroughly researched and thoughtful examination of how the concept of evil has changed throughout the history of America. However, a better subtitle for this book would have been "The Development of Secular Humanism in America." Besides some discussion in the first chapter and a smattering of references to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the text focuses on secularist thought to the exclusion of all other worldviews. This makes for some irritating reading, as the author frequently makes statements such as "All modern Americans assume [blank] to be true," or "[Blank] is the prevailing thought behind our nation's current philosophy." This comes across as deliberate oversimplification when I know that many Americans don't assume that [blank] is true, and that there is widespread dissent against [blank] as a philosophy. Still, though, quite a good read. The section examining eugenics in America was especially interesting.
