

REVIEWS

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Why Grow Up?—Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age

Susan Neiman

Penguin Random House UK, 80 Strand, London, WC2R 0RL, UK.
www.penguinrandomhouse.co.uk.
2016. viii + 246 pp. £ 9.99. PB. ISBN 9780141982496.

Most of us are nostalgic about our childhood and youth and think wistfully of the wonderful days that they were. The innocent pastimes one indulged in remind us of a blissful time. But on a deeper thought, was it because ignorance is bliss? Susan Neiman tries to lift the veil of fascination covering childhood and youth and tries to show its true picture, a period of forced ignorance. She does not waste time in setting the book's tone: 'Can philosophy help us to find a model of maturity that is not a matter of resignation?' (2). She defines her purpose: 'This book will argue that being grown-up is an ideal: one that is rarely achieved in its entirety, but all the more worth striving for' (22). Philosophy is not a veneer to cover up the feeling of defeat that comes with realising the truth.

It has long become a fad with philosophers to couch their statements in inaccessible jargon and circuitous analyses. Neiman comes as a welcome relief in the confusing sea of thinkers. Her language is natural and familiar and her style simple and smooth. She has a keen insight into the history of thought and compels the reader to go back to the pages of philosophy that one forgot to read closely, mainly because of the influence of how they have been understood till then. She makes us see Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant in a completely new light.

This is a book that breaks the fallacy of childhood being admirable and adulthood being a painful experience. One realises that 'infancy of reason is dogmatic' (ibid.). Adulthood is a

courageous experience of knowledge. Neiman affirms that we gloat over childhood because of our being 'lazy and scared' (5). She repeatedly tells us that childhood and youth are glorified because some powers want that to be so. Neiman is well-versed in psychology as the text and its subtext shows us throughout the book. She not only refers to psychological theories and experiments but her understanding of philosophy evolves from her understanding of individual and social psychology.

Neiman's concern over distractions that we have allowed technology to gift us is evident in the entire book. She tells us that consumerism is one of the principal reasons of our leaning towards adolescence: 'When consuming goods rather than satisfying work becomes the focus of our culture, we have created (or acquiesced in) a society of permanent adolescents' (19). She takes us through Rousseau's *Emile*, emphasising the need for rereading this philosopher and his thoughts on education. Neiman's keen insight into apparently eternal issues in education fascinates the reader with its freshness. Displaying her lively engagement with popular culture, she shows us that the movie versions of *Peter Pan* reflect how in 'less than a century, grown-ups declined from the merely dreary to the positively pathetic' (21).

However, the idea that childhood and youth are great periods of our lives is a new one, says Neiman: 'The glorification of childhood and youth, and the view of everything else after that as a let-down, is really quite new, and by no means universal' (32). She says that the 'nostalgia for childhood is confined to ... cultures that can be called WEIRD—as in Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich Democracies' (32). People living in other cultures like the present reviewer could vouch that this is not always the case. At least in India, childhood and youth have been

glorified for centuries and old age dreaded. Neiman is striking in her analysis and the logical extension of Plato's and Kant's thought. The plethora of choices for consumer goods given by the governments is a sweet distraction from more important issues.

Neiman's eloquence is poetic: 'Direct control leads to rebellion; indirect control leads to dependency' (39). 'Reason drives your search to make sense of the world by pushing you to ask why things are as they are. For theoretical reason, the outcome of that search becomes science, for practical reason, the outcome is a more just world' (115). She tells us that we need grown-ups to build an equitable society and reminds us that it was Rousseau who first treated growing up as a philosophical problem. Her statements are spiritual and sometimes have uncanny resemblances to the tenets of Advaita Vedanta. She almost repeats the Bhagavadgita when she says: 'Two passions, for glory and for luxury, are the source of all our ills; we are wicked because of the one and miserable because of the other' (53). But, her sentences are bereft of any religious colour or dogma. This book is a testimony to how philosophy and spirituality need not be frightening or out of reach. Neiman emphasises the need for an ideal and encourages that we strive for achieving it. And for this, we need to give an appropriate education to our children. 'Children are not born acting on principle, and most adults never get there. If we want them to have a chance of doing so, we have to adopt an education appropriate to their development' (58).

Neiman does a critical analysis of Rousseau's *Emile* and establishes that it is 'the clearest and most detailed practical manual of Enlightenment ever written' (56). This volume also traces various stages of the growing up of a human being. The first experience is surprising and wonderful and thereafter the surprise wears off. This is what growing up is, says Neiman. She is not content with easy explanations and believes that 'the claim that virtue is all there is to happiness is an eloquent variation on the fox's sour grapes' (114). Neiman argues that we stifle the interest of children to grow up by philosophising and learning, because it is easier to shut up questions.

Jean-Francois Lyotard asks: 'Why Philosophize?' (See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Why Philosophize* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014)). He says we do that because 'there is desire, because there is absence in presence, dreadness in life; and also because there is our power that is not yet power; and also because there is alienation, the loss of what we thought we had acquired and the gap between the deed and the doing, between the said and the saying; and finally because we cannot evade this: testifying to the presence of the lack with our speech' (*Why Philosophize*, 123). Neiman convinces us that growing up and philosophising are the same thing and that we need to do it for the same reasons as Lyotard's. Only she does it in a much more eloquent and friendly manner. She gives her short reason for growing up: 'Because it's harder than you think' (192).

Neiman concludes her book by saying: 'Courage is needed to oppose all the forces that will continue work against maturity' because it is a 'process of permanent revolution' (234). Many misconceptions are cleared in this book, which is a revised edition of the original publication in 2014 and has all the qualities of a self-help book and much more. For instance, our attention is drawn to the fact that Enlightenment was not Eurocentric. On the contrary, it questioned blind adherence to European ideals. This is a book on parenting as much as it is a book about rereading Enlightenment. Philosophy has for once become readable and more importantly, enjoyable. Recommended for anyone interested in human life.

Editor

Prabuddha Bharata



**Chinnamastā:
The Awful Buddhist and
Hindu Tantric Goddess**

Elisabeth Anne Beard

Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, A-44, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase I, New Delhi 110028. www.mlb.com. 2013. 176 pp. ₹350.00. PB. ISBN 9788120817487.