

INTERVIEW with Andrew Delbanco

*Andrew Delbanco, a literary critic and professor of humanities at Columbia University in New York, is the author of several books, including The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil (1996). Here, Delbanco talks about why he thinks the concepts of "sin" and "evil" should be reintroduced into public discourse, especially after Sept. 11. He also discusses why Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, one of the classics of American literature, has acquired a new significance in the 21st century. This interview [here slightly abridged] was conducted by FRONTLINE producer Helen Whitney in the winter of 2002.*

The novel that you felt really has a great deal to say about what happened in bin Laden -- the face of bin Laden and evil itself -- is *Moby Dick*. What does that novel tell us about what's happened?

There's this astonishing chapter in *Moby Dick* in which Melville tells us about how Captain Ahab reveals himself to the crew of the whale ship *Pequod* and explains to them what their voyage is actually all about. They've signed on thinking it's just another whaling voyage where they're going to go out to sea, they're going to kill so and so many whales, they're going to chop them up and boil the blubber down into oil and fill the barrels with oil and bring it back to port, sell it at market, spend the money on shore leave, and head out to sea again.

The extraordinary thing about that chapter is that it describes how a powerfully articulate, eloquent, charismatic man is able to make this diverse crew come around to seeing the world exactly the way he sees it, how he manages to make his pain their grudge. By the end of the chapter, they're lined up with him, he's fused his will to theirs, and they have become an instrument of his will. They have felt in his engagement, in his eloquence, an opportunity to become heroic, an opportunity to make a difference in the world, to strike back at the world.

I think Melville understood that Ahab's genius was his insight into the fact that all of them felt that they, too, had been wounded by the world. I think we all feel that we've in some way been mistreated or missed a chance or somebody else has gotten something that we deserved. Ahab taps into that feeling, and brings them around so that they become as intent on hunting down and killing that whale as he is. ...

Up until Sept. 11, I had always presented that chapter in *Moby Dick* to my students in something like the way I've just described it. I've always taken the opportunity to point out that it was in the 1930s and 1940s that Melville was discovered as the great genius that we now understand him to be. I think that had something to do with the fact that people alive in those years were witnessing the emergence in Europe of a demagogue who had many of the talents that Ahab had -- a mesmerizing speaker, an ability to bring young people around to seeing the world the way he saw.

In making that case, I'm drawn to one particular comment that Melville makes about the whale, in which he says in *Moby Dick*, "Ahab found evil visibly personified and made practically assailable." That is, in the whale, in the gigantic body of the white whale,

Ahab found a target. He found something one could aim at, one could strike at, through which one could feel a sense of power responding to what the world had done to him.

Of course, that's what Hitler did in Germany in the 1930s. He explained to the German people that their suffering, their indignity, was all ascribable to one visibly personified and practically assailable enemy, namely, the Jews.

My feeling on Sept. 11, and in the weeks and months thereafter, was that this lesson was no longer in the history books; it was no longer back there somewhere in my parents' or my students' grandparents' generation. We had just been attacked by somebody who had Ahab's talents, who had focused on us as the source of evil in the world, who had convinced young people that the way that they could make their lives meaningful and the way they could strike back was to attack the United States. ...

[You have] written about and reflected on evil for quite a while now. What brings you to the material? What in your personal biography makes it more than academic interest?

As I got a little older, I came to feel a certain disjunction between the world in which I was growing up and the world that I heard about from my parents, who had been born and [had] grown up in Germany in the 1910s and 1920s. When they reached adulthood, early adulthood, they discovered that they were living in the midst of a society that was descending into barbarism -- where, from one minute to the next, the pleasures of life, the security of life, the luxury of being able to worry about the trivial concerns of daily life, was all taken away. If you happened to be a Jew, you could be torn out of your bed in the middle of the night and sent on a train and turned into dust.

We were incredibly fortunate. My parents got out while it was still possible to get out. But I found this disjunction by learning something about the world from which they came, and feeling that I didn't have the vocabulary really to talk about their experience or to begin to understand their experience. ... So I guess I've always been interested in this question of how people have thought about, talked about, written about, tried to come to terms with the reality of evil.

Evil was real in the experience of my family. But to my generation, it had seemed to become an abstraction or some embarrassing outmoded theological concept. ... That put us in a position of considerable vulnerability, both to forces outside ourselves and to ourselves. Without some concept that's at least close to what the religious tradition calls "sin," we're handicapped in our ability to be sufficiently critical of ourselves. ... So I guess I felt a sort of gnawing need to, at least for my own sake, figure out some way of understanding what it was or where it came from or how one ought to respond to it when it made itself appear.

And so it did, again, on Sept. 11, 2001. Suddenly it was no longer an academic question. I think my generation understood in a new way that the norms of life, the expectations of ordinary life, can disappear in an instant, and nothing is the same anymore. ...

If we're told by brave journalists and people who are willing to put themselves in harm's way and at risk that something's happening far away on the other side of the world, that it looks like it's fomenting hatred and it's generating the kind of demonic energies that we think of as belonging to the past, we need to be able to take those reports seriously. We need to be able to take them seriously before they come home and show us face to face as they did on Sept. 11 how very seriously we ought to have taken them.

So, yes, I think that there's a place for moral discourse in the language of politics and in the discussion of public life. It would be a good thing for there to be more such discourse, as long as it is both frank and candid and realistic, about forces outside ourselves; and also simultaneously frank about our own capacities for acting thoughtlessly and indeed sinfully in the world. ...

We need to ask ourselves questions about the consequences of our actions. If we're stockholders, if we're taxpayers, what are we implicated in? What kind of behaviors in the world are we implicated in? I think you have to allow moral language to enter into that discussion. You can't keep it out. You can't say, "What's happening on the other side of the world has nothing to do with me."

What has ... Sept. 11 brought into the discussion [of evil]? ...

I feel what I have learned from the theological tradition that I've studied, from literature in general, writers like Melville and Dostoyevsky, is that all of us have a capacity for cruelty, for irrational rage, for selfishness, [and] to use the word that figures so importantly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, [for] pride.

Most of the time, we think of those characteristics as mistakes or excesses or errors or examples of lack of self-discipline. And most of the time, that's the level of intensity at which we experience them, both within ourselves and from others.

But when these destructive impulses, in which we are able to convince ourselves that our perspective is the only one that matters and that anyone who gets in our way is expendable, ... if that impulse of unbridled self-love takes over and becomes the empowering driving force of life, then there are some writers who say that it's time to call it evil.

I think we don't want to go in that direction. The best writers have always instructed us not to go in that direction. But at the same time, to pretend that an event like that which took place on Sept. 11, 2001, can be explained with the ordinary language of politics or psychology seems to me quite inadequate to what happened. We really did experience evil on Sept. 11, and we need to think about it. We need to understand it in order to be able to cope with it, both in others and in ourselves.

Is evil primarily but exclusively ... inside of ourselves? ... Or is there some mysterious, outside-of-ourselves possibility as well?

What I like so much about the Genesis story, which has been elaborated on by so many poets and artists, is that it captures perfectly the paradox or the double-ness of evil. That is, it tells us there's no garden that doesn't have a serpent in it. If you manage to convince yourself that you're in a perfect paradise where there is nothing dangerous lurking out there, you've made a big mistake. You're not where you think you are.

Yet, through the metaphor of the serpent and the temptation, it also teaches that there's something within us that's responsive to evil, that's responsive to the allurements, the enticements of the voice that says you've been unjustly left out of the good times. You know, "There's this tree, and if you only just walk over there and reach up and eat of the fruit of that tree, you will be empowered. You will become Lord and Master. You will no longer be subject, you will be Master, no longer subservient, but the one who's in charge." That's a very alluring promise to which I suspect very few people are entirely immune.

So it's a great story, and no doubt, for that reason, the basis of some of the great works of literature, because it captures the truth about experience. Yes, evil is out there. Yes, evil is real, is something external. But it's also something within ourselves. It's mobile. It moves in and out. And that's what's so difficult about it; that's what's so difficult to cope with about it. ...

I'm speaking here about what the theological tradition would call "moral evil." There was a time when many philosophers would have described what we would now call natural disasters -- earthquakes, floods, accidents, catastrophes of one kind or another -- as natural evil, and would have attributed to nature itself a certain kind of evil. I'm not sure that I can any longer think that way.

But [to think about] the concept of moral evil or, to put it more succinctly, with that word that a lot of people in the modern world are uncomfortable with -- the word "sin" -- ... I think is still incumbent on us.

If you think about it in the way that the best writers that I know recommend that we think about it, then you have to be aware of it in yourself as well as in others. It's not something that doesn't belong to me. But it's something that, if we develop an awareness of it, maybe we can cope with it. Maybe we can control it. Maybe we can even channel it into more positive directions.

But the worst thing you can do is to pretend that it's not there. The worst thing you can do is to pretend that human beings are put together genetically, morally, psychologically -- whichever vocabulary you prefer to use to speak about the way human beings are put together -- to pretend that human beings are exclusively benevolent, selfless, altruistic. I just don't think that accords with the facts of history.

Briefly, before Sept. 11 and after Sept. 11, ... do you think that we take evil more seriously now? What was our reluctance to take it seriously before Sept. 11? ...

Yes. I think it's too early to tell what the long-term effects of Sept. 11 will be. I myself feel that it's not possible to live as glibly as we did before Sept. 11. The preoccupations that I had, that I saw in the television, that I saw in the popular press before Sept. 11 were put into a new light by that event.

I think our attention was drawn to the larger world in a way that it hadn't been. We had been fooling ourselves into thinking that we were living in some kind of perpetually prosperous, perpetually inviolable cocoon. Communism was over, more or less. So there was no enemy out there that had the power to harm us anymore. We didn't take very seriously the possibility that we were in a position to harm ourselves. On Sept. 11, we found out that we were wrong about that.

Now, the word "evil" came back into common discourse very quickly after Sept. 11. The president used it, called the perpetrators "evildoers." A few months later, he spoke of an "axis of evil," identifying certain countries in the world.

I have a complicated [reaction] to that, to that word in those contexts. On the one hand, I think we have to face up to the value of the word and not be squeamish about using it. We need to be willing to, on the one hand, acknowledge our deficiencies, our mistakes, our arrogance in the way we behave in the world as a nation.

So the situation since Sept. 11 calls for a very delicate balance between self-criticism and awareness. We need to ask questions about how we can make the world a place less hospitable to people like those who gave the orders to attack innocent civilians in the fall of 2001.

We're all living in the same world, and there is a sense in which we bear some responsibility for the misery and suffering of so many people in the world, who we saw in our television sets cheering and applauding at what had happened that day. That's not something we can just shake off and pretend we have no connection to it. But that's a different thing though from blaming ourselves and saying that there's no problem out there which is independent from us -- which I think there is.

[Has bin Laden offered us a completely new] quality of evil or style of it?

Hannah Arendt was trying to find a way of understanding this completely affectless bureaucratic personality that she saw in the utterly impassive, unresponsive face of Adolf Eichmann in the glass booth, when he was on trial in Jerusalem. What she came to believe is that he had sort of shut down his critical faculties. His thinking faculties had been shut down and he was acting as just a cog in the machine, as just a functionary, as just a follower of orders. His mind was focused on his duty, rather than on the consequences of what he was doing. I find that a somewhat persuasive account of what [a] certain number of the people involved in the Holocaust of the Nazi years were probably like.

I don't think that's what we experienced on Sept. 11, because there was a fervor ... on the part of witnesses who were sympathetic to what was done, a mood of celebration and almost ecstatic response to the event. That doesn't seem to me consistent with what Arendt was describing. It wasn't banal. It had something ... between a carnival and a horror show about it. ... There was nothing banal about either what happened or about those who made it happen. ...

As a nonbeliever, have the events of Sept. 11 just reconfirmed your sense that the heavens are empty?

I guess I would characterize myself as an unbeliever. Or, maybe hedging my bets a little bit, I would say not a believer, which kind of leaves room in the formulation for evolution, I suppose. But I don't think being "not a believer" is the same thing as believing that the heavens are empty, that the world is not a beautiful place, that creation is not something that deserves our awe, that merits our awe.

For secular-minded people like me, the events of Sept. 11 forced a lot of thinking about basic issues of belief and disbelief. One of the things that I think I find myself believing more in than ever -- maybe this is strange -- is the power of love, the power of human beings to save each other in the face of the most horrific experiences. I think that that belief is not too far from the core belief of the religious traditions that I feel close to -- Judaism and the Christianity that grew out of it.

Now, sometimes in certain moods, I feel like the discussions about where this human capacity for love and, by the same token, the human capacity for hatred and cruelty and evil ... sometimes strike me as rather scholastic or academic.

On Sept. 11, we saw in front of our eyes human beings at their worst and human beings at their best. The great religious traditions have told us that that's what human beings are about, that love can be saving, and that we have to be on guard all the time against the darkness within. So I find a lot of truth in the religious tradition. In a way, I suppose I kind of evade what some of my religious-minded friends would say are the fundamental questions about the nature of God and the nature of human destiny.

So I would say I'm sort of half a believer, and the believing half of me was actually more confirmed than discouraged by the events of Sept. 11 and the days that followed. ...

Was your falling away from it gradual or based on any of the things you've just been talking about? ...

On the one hand, one is tormented by one's doubts, and on the other hand, one is saved by one's doubts. It seems to me that doubt is probably the one infallible mark of the thinking person. Anybody who doesn't have some doubts about their point of view is a frightening kind of person to me. So if I were ever to come to describe myself as a religious person, it would have to be in something like these dual terms; that is, someone who had come to a belief that made doubt possible, a belief that somehow incorporated doubt. ...

Human beings seem to have an unquenchable need to believe in something larger than themselves. The idea of one's personal extinction being the end of everything is a very difficult idea to come to terms with. That need to believe in something larger than the self can lead in both destructive directions and very constructive directions. If it leads toward an irrational and thoughtless and uncritical willingness to dissolve the self in some larger entity -- the community, the group, the nation -- and to give an unthinking allegiance to that larger entity and to find all one's meaning in life from the fact that one belongs to that larger entity, it frightens me.

In our century, in the last century and now in the new century, I think we've seen how that kind of self-sacrifice on behalf of a larger entity can have the most terrible consequences for other human beings, even if it allows you to leave this world in a burst of ecstatic self-immolation. It leaves a lot of bodies, a lot of suffering, a lot of anguish in your wake.

On the other hand, if this appetite for something larger than the self leads you to engage with other human beings so that you get out of your little world of petty, petty personal concerns, and you feel at the end of the day that you've actually touched another life, then it seems to me that's a pretty good formula for human happiness. All the philosophers of happiness that I know anything about have always insisted that happiness is not a solitary thing; that happiness involves relation and mutuality. So, again, religion turns out to be a complicated, at least dual way of thinking about the world. ...

For many people, Sept. 11 was the most terrifying look into their own mortality through the images of people falling out of windows and the anguished cell phone goodbyes. [It] forced most of us to imagine [our own deaths]. Was that true for you?

I think Sept. 11 brought home to me and to a lot of people I know the fact of how fragile and contingent our lives are -- how you say goodbye to your spouse and children in the morning, and you can't blithely assume that they'll come back in the afternoon.

I was mercifully spared from that experience. But my children all knew people who thought their parents or uncle or aunt or cousin [were] going to work that day just like any other day, and didn't come home. So everybody that afternoon had to start coming to terms with this face in a very direct and very, very personal way. ...

I live on the other end of Manhattan Island from where it happened. But the smell, this acrid odor, was in the air for weeks after that morning. You got used to it, sort of. But then, every once in a while, you would realize that you were smelling, among other things, the odor of burning human flesh.

And for many people, it was the flesh of people they knew. So one had to be really pretty locked into one's own little world not to think in a new way about what mattered in daily life. ... It became real, as it had been for many generations. But it hadn't been so real for our generation. ...
