

The Morality of Mass Murder

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Since the wars against Iraq and Yugoslavia, we have learned that it is easy, apparently, to kill strangers from a long distance. Until fairly recently in history, wars were largely hand-to-hand combat within a killing zone where a man had to plunge his sword or spear into the chest of another human being. Even an archer generally had to witness the bloody results of his skill. Artillerymen were among the first to be able to launch killing machines from an impersonal distance. What this might mean was captured by an English soldier in World War Two, Henry Reed, in his poem “Judging Distances”:¹

Not only how far away, but the way that you say it
Is very important. Perhaps you may never get
The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to report on a landscape: the central sector,
The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday,
And at least you know

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army
Happens to be concerned—the reason being,
Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know
There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and the poplar,
And those which have bushy tops; and lastly
That things only seem to be things.

By changing the distance, we may alter our perspective on what things are. From the artillery’s point of view, “things only seem to be things,” and in the late afternoon sun “a pair of what appear to be humans appears to be loving.” What really matters to the army, however, is not a couple making love but “in what direction are they, and how far away?”

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¹ Henry Reed, *Collected Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 50–51.

The significance of trees and lovers, apparently, depends on distance and upon point of view, which determines whether they are to be shot or spared. Ordinary people in the armed forces at all levels are repeatedly asked to make the decision, to shoot or not shoot people they have not so much as glimpsed through a telescope. To kill strangers, Serb civilians, for example, who have done nothing to you or your country, seems an incredible decision, especially when the only justification provided is a philosophical theory of human rights to which few moral philosophers have ever subscribed. According to this theory, it is perfectly all right to kill one set of innocent civilians if the killing serves to help another set of innocent civilians whose rights have been abused.

The intellectual sources for this high-minded savagery are not far to seek. For several centuries, the dominant philosophical model for discussing moral decision-making has emphasized rational choices made according to universal and objective criteria. Descartes called for a rationalist revolution in ethical and political theory,² and Locke took the first steps toward what he called a “moral algebra”³ that would reduce all moral problems to abstract formulas. Psychology has not escaped the effect of this philosophical revolution. Lawrence Kohlberg, following Piaget, devised a model of moral development that dismisses all irrational attachments and loyalties as primitive and puts abstract and objective judgments about rights at the pinnacle.⁴ Kohlberg’s principal critics, including Carol Gilligan, have pointed out his bias in favor of white European, college-educated males,⁵ but they have failed to address his central mistake: the Socratic fallacy that moral life can be reduced to rational judgments.

To make impartial moral judgments, so the philosophers have told us, we must assume the perspective of a third person, some uninvolved party who can judge the situation dispassionately. This ideal of impassive objectivity goes back to the ancient Stoics, who proudly proclaimed themselves “citizens of the world.” The Stoic Epictetus even found it absurd that a man would mourn the loss of his own wife, while remaining indifferent to the news of the

² Cf. “Principles of Philosophy,” introductory letter, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, tr. by E. S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 211.

³ John Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, 3. 19 (vol. 2, pp. 209 ff. in A.C. Fraser edition, Oxford 1894).

⁴ Cf.: Lawrence Kohlberg, “A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Moral Education,” *The Humanist* 23 (Nov-Dec, 1972): 13–16; and Lawrence Kohlberg and Daniel Candee, “The Relationship of Moral Judgment to Moral Action,” in *Essays in Moral Development*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

death of another's wife. Adam Smith pointed out the obvious problem with the Stoic ideal, saying: "The man who should feel no more for the death or distress of his own father than for those of any other man's father or son, would appear neither a good son nor a good father."⁶

Nonetheless, Smith fell into the same trap and, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he based his account of moral reasoning on what he called the "impartial spectator," an imaginary third person who comes to reside as a "demigod within the breast" and judge of our moral decisions.⁷ Even in introducing his argument against Epictetus, Smith makes the sweeping generalization: "We should view ourselves, not in the light in which our own selfish passions are apt to place us, but in the light in which any other citizen of the world would view us." We are back, in other words, with the Stoics.

How far, in fact, can I go in stepping outside of myself to view my actions with objectivity? To put myself in my friend's shoes is not too difficult and to interpret the promptings of conscience as the voice of a god is not impossible; the farther I depart from myself, however, the more likely I am to view myself (and other people) in the abstract. If a man succeeded in dividing his consciousness in this way, as moral philosophers since the eighteenth century have recommended, he might have the feeling that there were another "I" roaming the streets, and in the generations following the triumph of rationalism in the eighteenth century, romantic writers warned against the dangers of excessive rationalization and often exploited the theme of *doppelgänger* (Poe's William Wilson) and split personalities (Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde)—mental derangements that showed the dangers of the personality divided against itself. Dr. Jekyll, let us recall, was a noble-minded scientist who could not reconcile his high-minded aspirations with a taste for sensual pleasures. Discovering the dualism within himself of man-the-beast and man-the-reasoning-angel, he made the tragic mistake of trying to eliminate the beast by separating his two natures. That, in essence, has been the disastrous project of modern ethics.

Are human beings even capable of sustaining an abstract objectivity that does not distinguish their own interests and concerns from those of all mankind? Lawrence Kohlberg, who held up such a standard as a moral ideal, was never able to find a sage who lived up to it. In fact, no one can free himself from prejudices in favor of the people he loves or the opinions he has been brought up to believe.

Even scholarship and news-reporting, where a "nothing but the facts" approach seems appropriate, can be corrupted by the pose of complete objec-

⁶ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1976), 239.

⁷ Smith, 228.

tivity. Setting aside the more controversial cases—such as the demand that only African-Americans be allowed to teach black history—a purely objective approach to social and cultural conflicts often leaves out the essential facts that gave rise to the problem. Individuals have their own points of view, but so do national groups and cultural traditions. The history of the past five hundred years will be told in quite different language and emphasis, if the teller is, say, an Icelander, an Orthodox Serb, or an African American. Of course, such histories would be very partial—like the history of Europe from the Polish perspective written by Norman Davies—but it would open up entire vistas that had been veiled. Frequently, it is only by adopting a point of view (if only temporarily) that a scholar or journalist can catch a glimpse of the truth that eludes all those whom impartiality has made blind.

Like a fair-minded traveler who goes native, for a time, in foreign lands, and comes back with an appreciation for the strange things he has witnessed and experienced, the historian or journalist can temporarily suspend his judgment on the aliens and enemies to whom he owes a fair and honest accounting. This was the approach used by Rebecca West in depicting the three parties in Bosnia—the Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims—on the eve of the Yugoslav bloodbath of World War Two.⁸ And after nearly fifty years of lies and propaganda masquerading as history, West's book reemerged in the 1990's as the only book in English that had anything to teach us about the Balkans.⁹

Here is the paradox: Fifty years after *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, journalists and scholars who donned the mantle of impartiality, expressed their opinions on the Bosnian civil war and the Kosovo conflict in terms that nearly always echoed the official statements issued by the U.S. State Department. Most of these journalists would have claimed to be an enemy to the sort of nationalisms that disfigured all the parties in the conflict and explained any apparent bias against the Serbs as a rational response to Serbian ultra-nationalism. The sticking point in this argument is that the Bosnian civil war was, in fact, a conflict of nationalisms and religions, and a profession of anti-nationalist/non-religious "impartiality" was inevitably partisan, favoring any side that claimed—however dishonestly—to represent the cause of multi-

⁸ Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (London: 1940).

⁹ The contrast is especially painful in such overtly biased books as Roy Gutman's *A Witness to Genocide* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), and the pseudo-objectivity of Tim Judah's *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997)—whose author had not done even the most rudimentary historical research on topics such as the origin of the Bosnian Serbs.

culturalism. But, to justify the bombing of Serbs, an entire nation had to be demonized in the abstract as nationalists who violated human rights.

The viciousness of this propaganda came out recently in the accounts of a Bulgarian UN worker who was shot by the Albanians because he was speaking either Bulgarian or Serbian. The *Washington Post's* report made it pretty clear that the Albanians had simply made a mistake, killing an innocent Bulgar instead of a Serb. This bigotry is not a new development. At the height of the bombing, a Balkans expert warned Jim Lehrer that the KLA would probably drive all the Serbs out of Kosovo. Musing, the objective anchorman wondered if such an event would be such a bad thing, thus implicitly denying the Kosovo Serbs the right to exist.

To Lehrer, as to most Americans, Kosovo was an abstract war and for every moment of TV time spent on Serb civilian casualties, there were hours of footage of Albanian refugees. There is an advantage to this perspective of five thousand miles: we are far enough away to regard the slaughter of ordinary human beings with indifference. This, too, has been the unremitting tendency of modern ethics, to force us to rise above ourselves and view the whole world as if we were gods or angels. Here is the classic statement of William Godwin two hundred years ago:

[T]he soundest criterion of virtue is to put ourselves in the place of an impartial spectator, of an angelic nature, suppose, beholding us from an elevated station, and uninfluenced by our prejudices.¹⁰

Godwin did not hesitate to accept the logical consequences of his angelic point of view, even if it meant sacrificing those who should have been dearest to him. Suppose, he asks, a house catches on fire, and a man has to choose between saving the life of Bishop Fenelon or the philosopher's valet? Godwin's answer is that even if the valet is your father, it is your duty to save a third-rate philosopher who today is scarcely better known than Godwin's father.

Recently, Thomas Nagel has argued that each person must learn to take the extra-terrestrial perspective from which "everyone's life matters as much as his does, and his matters no more than anyone's." In making any moral decision, one must make a judgment as if one were observing the world from the outside, as "a powerful and benevolent outsider, dispensing benefits to the inhabitants of the world."¹¹ Such arguments are the commonplaces of academic moral philosophy.

¹⁰ William Godwin, *Political Justice* II.2.

¹¹ Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13–14.

In transcending the egoism of common-sense morality and assuming indifference towards ourselves and our friends, we may end up with a generalized indifference to other people. We are not and cannot be benevolent outsiders looking down upon ourselves and our situations. Even to imagine ourselves as divine onlookers borders on megalomania and diminishes the importance of all the other “first persons” that exist in the universe. Sartre, following a similar path, reached the conclusion that hell is other people, and the technocrats who wage war on faraway civilians seem determined to make that hell a reality.

The great cliché of the modern world is that distance no longer matters: the significance of geographical separation has been eliminated by air travel and electronic media. However, the global village can be a dangerous metaphor. If everyone in the world is as dear to me as my next-door neighbor, I might be tempted to treat my neighbor as a complete stranger. Adolf Hitler also believed that technology had shrunk the world, and in *Mein Kampf* he used the global village argument to justify the creation of a new European order that required the elimination of large classes of other people.

Distance does matter. It is easier to drop bombs or launch rockets upon an enemy than it is to fight him face to face. Saturation bombing of civilian targets is endurable so long as we do not see the victims. But few of us could bring ourselves to murder women and children, one by one, no matter what the circumstances.

An RAF crew member who watched, from twenty thousand feet, the effects of the firebombing of Hamburg described his feelings as “fascinated but aghast, satisfied yet horrified.” Lt. Col. Dave Grossman comments:

Throughout World War II bomber crews on both sides killed millions of women, children, and elderly people, no different from their own wives, children, and parents. The pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and gunners in these aircraft were able to bring themselves to kill these civilians primarily through application of the mental leverage provided to them by the distance factor.... From a distance, I can deny your humanity; and from a distance, I cannot hear your screams.¹²

Grossman is a former Army ranger, who spent years of research on combat and failed to turn up one single instance of individuals who have refused to kill the enemy from a long range nor a single instance of psychiatric trauma associated with this type of killing. This generalization includes the flight

¹² Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995), 101–02.

crews of the planes that dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Almost as if to prove the point, the pilot of the *Enola Gay* published a book in 1998 and went on a promotional tour, celebrating his accomplishments, under the sponsorship of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

James Dickey flew combat missions in World War Two and wrote a poem in which he recalls his fire-bombing missions:

Reflections of houses catch;
 Fire shuttles from pond to pond
 In every direction, till hundreds flash with one death.
 ...
 The death of children is ponds
 Shutter-flashing; responding mirrors; it climbs
 The terraces of hills
 Smaller and smaller, a mote of red dust
 At a hundred feet; at a hundred and ten it goes out.
 This is what should have got in
 To my eye.

“Should have” but did not. Years later the pilot is still unable to come to grips with the reality, “still unable to get down there or see / What really happened.”¹³ Commenting on his own poem, Dickey deplored the facile assumption of responsibility that characterized Sylvia Plath’s “feeling guilty over the Jews.” Guilt is personal, the poet insists, something that has to be earned, “but sometimes when you earn it, you don’t feel the guilt you ought to have.”¹⁴

Distance hardens us and numbs our conscience; it reduces the objects of our attention to abstractions. Take a child-murderer like Harry Lime (from Graham Greene’s novel *The Third Man*) onto a Ferris Wheel and ask him of his victims.

Harry took a look at the toy landscape below and came away from the door....“Victims?” he asked. “Don’t be melodramatic.... Look down there,” he went on, pointing through the window at the people moving like black flies at the base of the Wheel. “Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving—for ever? If I said you

¹³ James Dickey, “The Firebombing” in *The Whole Motion: Collected Poems, 1945–1992* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University/New England University Press, 1992), 193–200.

¹⁴ James Dickey, *Self-Interviews*, eds. B. and D. Reiss (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 137–39

can have twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stops, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money—without hesitation? Or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare?”

At a sufficient distance, love thins out to indifference, and viewed from a sufficient height the whole Earth becomes no more than the stage for our ambitions.

Moral distance and the objective point of view are relevant approaches to mathematical puzzles and scientific theories; they are useful tools in the pursuit of fairness and self-knowledge; they serve to keep us in balance and prevent us from going off the deep end in pursuit of our own desires; they tend to check self-love before it turns to egomania, and patriotism before it grows into chauvinism. But perspective and objectivity are essentially negative virtues, setting boundaries to our passions and giving rules to our love. Two thousand years before Descartes, Aristotle had argued that it was a mistake to apply rigorous logic to human problems.¹⁵ Recently, Howard Gardner in summing up recent researches in cognitive psychology and anthropology came to a similar conclusion: “Pure logic ... which developed long after our survival mechanisms had fallen into place ... may be useful under certain circumstances... But logic cannot serve as a valid model of how must individuals solve most problems most of the time.”¹⁶

In trying to rise above ourselves, our friends, and the entire human race, we learn the evil lesson that other people do not matter. Once upon a time we killed for passion; today, under the influence of a false philosophical theory, we kill in cold blood on a scale undreamed of in the allegedly violent past, and, unlike Genghis Khan and Atilla, we kill without really knowing that we are killing. Our morality of objectivity and distance has deadened our conscience and makes us numb to the human suffering we have inflicted.

¹⁵ Eth.Nic. I.3, 1094b.

¹⁶ Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 370.