Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide – Edited by John K. Roth

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Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide
Edited by JOHN K. ROTH
Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 352 pp. £60.00 cloth, £18.99 paper

Having followed the literature on genocide since the beginning of 1990s I have been often struck that academic writing on genocide is very much like non-professional pursuits in youth sports: anything is considered 'a good try'. The French have a good phrase for what I mean here: *n'importe quoi*. Works exhibiting no sound methodology, replete with irrational claims without factual basis and beliefs about foreigners adopted on faith limited only by a 'the worse the better' criterion of plausibility dominate the literature on genocide. My only consolation in confronting this literature has been that philosophers, for the most part, had not been the ones taking part in this orgy of nonsense. The book *Genocide and Human Rights* takes even that solace away as it purports to be 'a philosophical guide' to genocide.

Already in the 'Prologue' the book's editor, John K. Roth, manages to confuse 'philosophy' with 'philosophers'. Thus we learn that philosophy "has ignored genocide"; that philosophy has not been "sufficiently self-critical about [its] bystanding and complicity"; that philosophy has its "darker side"; that philosophy has its "association with genocide"; and that philosophy "can expedite genocide". Of course, it pains me to have to state such an obvious thing, but *philosophy* cannot engage in any of these things. Unfortunately, this basic conceptual confusion is used as an organizing principle for the book, so that its twenty-five, largely unreadable but for the most part mercifully short, essays are grouped in four parts addressing questions that make no sense: Part I, The Problem of Evil: How Does Genocide Affect Philosophy?; Part II, Innocent or Guilty? Philosophy's Involvement in Genocide; Part III, Will Genocide Ever End? Genocide's Challenge to Philosophy; and Part IV, Resistance, Responsibility, and Human Rights: Philosophy's Response to Genocide.

Each part of the book is preceded by a short mini-introduction by the editor where, every time, he perpetuates his embarrassing conceptual confusions from the 'Prologue'. Thus in his second mini-prologue we read: "As the case of Martin Heidegger's Nazism suggests, philosophy and genocide can all too easily become bedfellows unless philosophy thinks deeply and self-critically about where it ought and ought not to go." Leaving aside the question of what could possess a professional (paid) philosopher to suppose that *philosophy* could possibly "think"—let alone deeply or self-critically—or "go" anywhere—let alone go there based on some normative realization of the right direction—the thing to emphasize here is that the case of Martin Heidegger suggests nothing of the sort described in this sentence. That Heidegger (considered by anyone with training in analytical philosophy to be a thoroughly confused thinker) was a Nazi most certainly does not suggest that *philosophy* has a problem, just as the fact that some dentist was a Nazi does not suggest that dentistry has a problem, which it had better correct by deep and self-critical thought.

The worst article was by Thomas W. Simon, 'Genocide, Evil, and Injustice: Competing Hells'. In his pseudo-research that substitutes assertions for

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arguments and claims for facts Simon even manages, in a way that is no doubt actionable, to defame and slander a colleague, albeit of course from a foreign country, as a "Lesser Thinker" responsible for "promoting world conflicts, and global injustices", no less. Singing praises to "a relatively new academic discipline" of genocide studies Simon implores philosophers to "fully embrace genocide", and then finds it necessary to explain that this does not mean "to applaud genocide" but "give detailed analysis of it". And while certainly failing in the latter endeavour the article is full of cheering, calling on philosophers to write on the subject of genocide (more broadly construed as "injustice studies") and, presumably, thus carve out in humanities a "comfortable niche" as genocide studies did in social studies.

While only tangentially dealing with genocide, the article that is downright philosophically embarrassing is one by Stephen T. Davis, 'Genocide, Despair, and Religious Hope: An Essay on Human Nature', in which the author puts genocide literally to divine purpose. By invoking the horrors of genocide Davis gives us a supposedly novel "moral argument" for the existence of God called 'Genocide Argument': "1. Genocide is a departure from the way that things ought to be. 2. If genocide is a departure from the way that things ought to be, then there is a way that things ought to be. 3. If there is a way that things ought to be, then there is a design plan for things. 4. If there is a design plan for things, then there is a designer. 5. This designer we call 'God'." Like Davis, many other contributors to this book simply focus on issues that are the primary subject of their specialization in philosophy, and by only touching on genocide they must be thinking they can contribute to its elucidation while en route to entertaining quite unrelated claims of real interest to them.

An exception to the general quality of the articles is that by Raimond Gaita, 'Refocusing Genocide: A Philosophical Responsibility'. Gaita recognizes as a distinctly philosophical challenge "to obtain greater clarity about the concept of genocide itself" and makes a worthwhile attempt to provide just that. Significantly, Gaita is aware of "a deepening distrust of discursive reason in favour of storytelling amongst significant sections of the intelligentsia". While a victim himself of some of this emotive literary form, void of evidential reasons, i.e., the 'storytelling', as evidenced by the fact that he (as most non-devotees of the study of Rwanda) gets Rwanda wrong, Gaita for the most part does take genocide seriously by focusing on the right questions such as: "What will set the limits to what can rightly be called genocide?" Aware that "the term *genocide* is often misused", and more importantly, that real harms to real people can ensue from such abuses of the concept, he engages in a laudable project of accomplishing greater accuracy in the identification of genocide by clarifying the concept as much as this can be achieved.

Finally, let me point to yet another regrettable feature this book shares with virtually all other ones on the theme of genocide. Many authors on this topic confuse understanding of genocide with its eradication. In a typically self-aggrandizing way the editor describes the purpose of the book as being to "help philosophy and philosophers to make a contribution to the prevention of genocide". This apparently virtuous intention is evidently predicated on

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the intuitive notion that genocide is an unbearable phenomenon. But so, too, is the Ebola virus, for instance, and yet one would be hard-pressed to find published arguments supporting the claim that a philosophical understanding of Ebola (or nuclear weapons, or global warming) could prevent it, much less that the "purpose" of philosophical investigation is to do so.

One good fact about this book is that it was not published by a prestigious university press, but there are plenty of books on this topic that come close to having the same serious problems this book does that were. This may make us wonder: 'Why do publishers encourage such bad books?' and 'How are we supposed to attain discovery if this is considered 'good'?' While it is certainly fashionable to claim that we live 'in an age of genocide'—a phrase Roth uses repeatedly, ad nauseam—we would be much closer to the truth if we realized that what empowers the production of the works like the one reviewed here is the fact that we live in an age of genocidalism.[1]

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1. On this notion see Aleksandar Jokic, 'Genocidalism', *The Journal of Ethics*, 8 (2004), pp. 251–297. I thank Tiphaine Dickson for discussing with me various claims made in the reviewed book.

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