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TO KILL A MANDARIN

IN *LE PÈRE GORIOT*, Balzac has the main character, Rastignac, ask his friend Bianchon whether he would agree to the killing of a Chinese Mandarin in far-away China if this would yield Bianchon a great fortune. After some joking, Bianchon answers negatively.¹ For Rastignac, this thought experiment is connected to a practical dilemma: he is deliberating whether to agree that a man he has never seen, and who has done Rastignac no harm, should be killed so that he, Rastignac, may enjoy the wealth that the man's sister, who loves Rastignac, will inherit.

I believe that this exchange in Balzac's *Le père Goriot* encapsulates an important and interesting thought experiment that has been unjustly neglected in the philosophical literature. In this paper I will present it in a slightly adapted way (which helps abstract it from the specific details of Balzac's novel), and argue that it has disturbing implications for existentialist thought. I will show that although the thought experiment coheres with many existentialist themes, it also undermines a central existentialist notion. Section I presents the thought experiment. Section II adds clarifications and answers some questions and objections. Section III relates the thought experiment to existentialist thought; it presents the existentialist themes that the thought experiment supports and exemplifies, but also shows how it destabilizes a major existentialist theme.

I

We all want some things very badly. Some of us very much want to get married, or to marry this or that person. Others want a divorce. Some

pray for children. Others want the children to get out of the house. Some want a job, or a better job with more prestige and salary. Others want to be healthy, or loved, or much more intelligent, or famous, or beautiful, or thin, or sexually attractive. Many want to be rich, and very many to be young again. There are also many other things that you and I, perhaps secretly, very much want, but are very unlikely to ever attain.

Now suppose a magician approaches you, and suggests that he will give you that thing you so much want. Tomorrow morning you will wake up young, or beautiful, or more intelligent, or rich, or whatever. You can have what you want. In return, the only thing you have to do is to agree to something. Tonight, after you go to bed, after you say “good night” to everyone and put your head on the pillow, after you close your eyes and start breathing slowly, when you are all alone, you will have to inwardly consent that someone whom you do not know, far away, will die. That is the only thing you have to do. Nothing else is required, certainly nothing physical. Once you have done that, your part of the deal is accomplished. And you will be immediately rewarded, receiving what you have wanted so much.

Let me tell you more about the conditions of this “deal.” First, the nationality of that anonymous person who will die is not important, but he should belong to a national group you have nothing for or against, about which you know very little, and of which you have never met any members.² Nor is it likely that you ever will. You have heard that in some far away land there are people of that nationality, and perhaps you know more or less what the climate there is like, but not much more. And even that information is not necessary.

This person we are discussing has no family. Hence, no spouse will be widowed, no children will be orphaned, and no parents will lament his death. Nor does he have any siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, or friends who will miss him when he is gone. Nor is he particularly liked by his co-workers. He will be forgotten soon after he dies. The person whose fate you have to decide has no special talents that will be lost to the world. He is not about to discover a new medicine that would save many lives, or write a great novel that would change perceptions or give joy. Like most people in the world, his occupation consists of some boring, repetitive technical activity, and his place at work could be easily filled by others. Moreover, there is no shortage of people looking for employment in his society.

The person is not very happy, and he sometimes even contemplates

suicide. Since he will not know that he is going to die, he will feel no anxiety concerning the approaching death. The death will be completely painless and very quick; one day he will simply droop at his desk, or in the field, or he will die in his sleep. No panic would spread because of this sudden, unexplained death. No plague or attack would be feared, and a satisfactory explanation (say, a sudden heart failure) would be quickly found, and generally accepted.

Moreover—and this is a very important point—no one will be able to connect you and your consent to this person's death. No one will ever know or believe that your internal "yes" tonight, after you close your eyes, is related to the death of someone thousands of miles away, whom you never saw. Even if you were one day to tell the story to somebody, say, a psychologist, he or she would of course not believe that you had really caused this death, and would treat this notion as a fantasy or hallucination. It is one of the conditions of the experiment that you can be completely assured that no one will ever know that you became or obtained what you did because someone, somewhere, died. You can rely on this absolutely.

In return for this person's death, you may not ask for your life, or the life of someone else who is dear to you. Nor can you ask to end world poverty or world hunger, or to put an end to a war. You may only ask for some egoistic, personal benefit that could never be considered as morally justifying the killing of an innocent, unknown person. The question does not refer to what you *should* do in these circumstances. That of course is clear: you should not, under any respectable moral theory, kill that person in return for becoming much more sexually attractive, or rich, or tall, or beautiful, or intelligent. The question relates to what you would, rather than should, do.

Do not answer me, nor anyone else, except yourself. No one else will ever know the answer. This is only for you to consider for yourself, alone, tonight, after you close your eyes. This is only between you and yourself. What would be the outcome of this thought experiment? I believe that—if it is quite clear that no one would ever know—many would kill that anonymous stranger in a far away land. And those who would not kill, would have a difficult time—significantly more difficult than they had imagined—in refusing this deal. They will feel that the temptation is very, very strong.

Tonight, after everyone goes to sleep, try it.

II

Many questions and objections may be raised about this thought experiment. First, it may be pointed out that we do not need the thought experiment to know that people are ready to do many terrible things to receive what they want; a quick glance at any newspaper will teach us this. However, the objection misses an important point in the thought experiment: the objection discusses, as we so like to do, the evilness of *others*, helping us feel that “they” are immoral, thus again allowing us to escape from what we discovered that *we* are ready to do. It thereby enables us to escape from a sincere and disturbing personal encounter with ourselves to a much more impersonal, and hence comfortable, discussion of some sociological or psychological facts. We might not need the thought experiment to know that people are bad; but we do need it to know something about *ourselves*, and to cope with it.

Some may also argue that this thought experiment already appears in another literary context—Dostoevsky’s existentialist *Crime and Punishment*, which describes how Raskolnikov allows himself to murder two old ladies.³ However, there are essential differences between the two. First, Raskolnikov cannot be absolutely certain that he would never be caught, while the absolute guarantee that we will never be pointed at is an important factor in this thought experiment. Secondly, Raskolnikov has some kind of an elitist ideology about “geniuses” who are above normal morality and are allowed to perform deeds that “regular” people may not; when he plans and commits the murder he believes it to be a means that is justified by the end. In the present thought experiment it is clear that the “deal” is morally wrong, and the question is whether, knowing this, we would abstain from consenting to it. Thirdly, Raskolnikov is described as a very atypical, as well as a somewhat odd and disturbed, person, while the present thought experiment applies to the great multitude of perfectly normal people around us, including you and me. Fourthly, *Crime and Punishment* ends with Raskolnikov’s complete repentance of his deed. I am not sure that this is the way it would end for all those who perform the thought experiment presented here. Finally, when one reads *Crime and Punishment* one examines the life and times of a certain Raskolnikov, who is different from oneself. Once again it is *he*, rather than *I*, who is ready to perform a terrible deed. The present thought experiment forces *me* into the story.

It might also be asked whether the thought experiment is applicable to religious Monotheist believers. Since Monotheism ascribes omniscience to God, the proviso that no one would ever know of the “deal” does not apply to Monotheists. God will know about it, and will punish for it in this lifetime or the next; if God exists, no perfect crime is possible. However, the thought experiment is useful also for religious Monotheists, since it can teach them how religious they are. They can learn from the thought experiment about the extent to which their moral-religious behavior is determined by a genuine belief in God, and the extent to which it is determined by mere fear of the reaction of community and friends. The more difficult believers find it to reject the deal, the more their faith is moved by fear of what people will say or do, and the less by a genuine belief in God.

Some may suggest that only very few will, in fact, consent to the deal, even if it is absolutely certain that no one would ever know about it. I doubt that; moreover, the thought experiment is instructive also for those who in the end reject it, but find that doing so is significantly more difficult than they had expected. I do not have, of course, reliable and well-tested statistical data about the percentage or number of those who would either consent to the deal or would have significant difficulties in rejecting it. But I have presented the thought experiment many times, to rather large audiences, in three continents. Quite inconsistently with what I have written above about the importance of not telling others about one’s choice, I sometimes did ask my audience about their decisions. In all cases, the vast majority admitted that—if it were clear that no one would ever know—they would either kill the anonymous stranger or have severe difficulties in refraining from doing so. Only a few raised their hands when asked who was sure that he or she would turn down the “deal,” or for whom refusing the “deal” would be easy.

Some may also suggest that if the situation described in the thought experiment were to actualize itself into real life, most people would have not, in fact, consented to the “deal.” However, when we compare the ways that we think we would behave in morally challenging situations to the way we actually behave in them, we find that in most cases we do not behave much better than we thought we would, and in some cases even a little worse. I see no reason to believe that the situation would be different in this case.

III

The thought experiment incorporates some themes found in existentialist thought. One is self-deception.⁴ Most of us think of ourselves as quite moral. Although we do not regularly see ourselves as morally perfect, by and large we tend to be satisfied with our moral behavior and attitudes. Moreover, we evaluate ourselves as being much better than all of those cheats, bullies, and murderers who employ whatever means at their disposal, from low cunning to raw violence, in order to achieve what they want. However, this thought experiment suggests that we are significantly less moral than we usually take ourselves to be. Many of us are ready, or at least have significant difficulty in refusing, to kill an unknown person who has done us no harm, if this allows us to attain certain ends. The thought experiment suggests that we pretend that we are more moral and autonomous than we actually are, not only to others, but also to ourselves. Most of us are extremely surprised to realize that we are ready to, or have significant difficulty in refusing to, murder a human being, if it is clear that we would never be caught. Our self-image was a much better one.

A second theme has to do with the importance, or centrality, of society's supervision over us.⁵ We like to see ourselves, at least concerning some important issues, as autonomous individuals rather than as greatly influenced by the social pressures of the people around us. We see ourselves as having our own moral character, which is independent of society's views. And we usually regard our abhorrence of murder as part of ourselves, rather than being a result of the fear of what others would say and do, or other forms of peer pressure. But this thought experiment shows that we overstate our autonomy. Even concerning murder, a clear and major moral wrong, our decision is significantly guided by external pressures, and is greatly influenced by our fear of what others would say; once this external factor is removed, and it is clear that other people will not know, we are either ready to commit murder, or experience surprisingly intense difficulties in resisting the urge. And since our values are related to our sense of moral character, self-dignity and identity (we are the kind of people who "do not do such things"), the latter, too, are significantly based upon the fear of what others may think.

Another theme is that of the difference between existential knowledge and intellectual knowledge.⁶ After we complete this thought experiment, we may sense, even as it happens, the process of distancing

ourselves from its personal import. At the end of the process we will know intellectually, but not existentially, that we are less moral than we thought. We will then deal with the issue only rationally, in the third person, as if it had not affected us and had no consequence for our own selves, having managed to escape completely from its unpleasant personal implications.

For those interested in religious existentialism, the thought experiment points to the distinction between religiousness moved by institutional considerations and fear of others, on the one hand, and a genuine belief, on the other. As suggested above, those whose moral-religious behavior is motivated by their relation to God rather than to a church or other social establishments will feel less enticed to accept this “deal,” which guarantees only that no *human* will even learn of it.

Thus, the Mandarin thought experiment conforms to, and to some extent confirms, some central existentialist themes. I would like to argue, however, that it also casts doubt on an important and central existentialist notion: the value of being an authentic, autonomous individual, who behaves as he or she does not because of fear of what others would say, but because he or she genuinely chooses this or that course of action.⁷ The thought experiment suggests that if we were true, autonomous individuals, if we really succeeded in ignoring society and its interdictions, and contrived to overcome the way society restricts our freedom and distorts our individuality, then we would have killed an unknown person.

Thus, it is not clear that we should strive to realize this existentialist end, and call people to be themselves and to overcome the fear of what others might think of them. It seems that people cannot be trusted. Not only criminals, or people who are hungry and angry, but also others, such as ourselves, need to be well supervised. The thought experiment suggests, then, that there are important advantages in fearing others, in hesitating to be real individuals, and in constantly apprehending what “they” will say. The Mandarin thought experiment has many implications for existentialism, but not all of them confirm existentialist motifs.

1. Honoré de Balzac, *Le père Goriot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 184. For the ancestry of this question see Carlo Ginzburg, "Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994): 46–60. Ginzburg treats the problem as related to the influence of distance on our moral sensibility.
2. For simplicity's sake, I shall use the masculine gender, but the victim may just as well be a woman.
3. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1992).
4. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), pp. 3–44 and section 38; hereafter abbreviated *SZ*; Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), part 1 chap. 2; hereafter abbreviated *EN*; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 141.
5. See, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for my Work as an Author: A Report to History*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 115; hereafter abbreviated *PV*; *SZ*, sections 35–38; *EN*, pp. 7–103.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Mauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), sections 344, 347; Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 33–37.
7. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 119; *PV*, pp. 115, 130–31; *EN*, part 1, chap. 2 sec. 3.