

Encyclopedia of
*Death & the Human
 Experience*

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the humanity of the victims. The aim of an atrocity is not just to harm the victims, but to desecrate them. Not every moral wrong, then, counts as an atrocity. The typical lie or act of shoplifting is hardly an atrocity. Not even murder need be about desecrating the victim. The list of atrocities that human beings have committed throughout history is disconcertingly long. During the 1990s, the killing of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis occurred in Rwanda, where leaflets and posters were distributed by Hutus characterizing Tutsis as snakes and cockroaches. Symbolically, snakes and cockroaches are rivaled only by rats as creatures that are viscerally the antithesis of what it is to be a human being. In Rwanda, it was blacks desecrating blacks. In the Asian world, Asians have desecrated Asians, as with China and Japan. In the Muslim world, Muslims have desecrated one another. Saddam Hussein, for instance, treated Shi'ite Muslims in a way that calls to mind the Nazi treatment of Jews.

The atrocities of the Nazi era represent the most sophisticated and sustained desecration of people to have taken place in the 20th century. And while it is clear that the extermination of the Jews was the central aim of the Nazi regime, it is equally clear that an ineliminable part of that aim was also to kill the Jews in a most dehumanizing manner. From transporting Jews to concentration camps in trains that had no restroom facilities of any form to making them dig their own graves to the brutal ways that they were used in so-called medical experiments, the aim was to peel away the Jews' sense of humanity.

Strikingly, atrocities are often committed by individuals who regard themselves as decent individuals. For instance, the lynching of blacks by whites in the United States in the Old South was typically committed by whites who considered themselves to be God-fearing Christians. The aim of lynching was not merely to punish blacks, but to revel in an utter disregard for the black body. During times of war, it commonly happens that male soldiers who think that rape is reprehensible nonetheless rape women who are identified as being on the side of the enemy. Needless to say, rape is one of the most profound ways in which a body can be desecrated, where the aim is not at all about killing the victim.

ATROCITIES

An atrocity is morally wrong behavior that is so horrendous that it reveals a brazen disregard for

Evil Behavior and a Sense of Community

How can psychologically healthy people who take themselves to be decent individuals collectively do the unthinkable to others? Two important considerations present themselves. First, a defining feature of human beings is that they are capable of symbolic representation. A symbolic representation can be ephemeral and of little social significance as with the white glove that was once identified with Michael Jackson. Symbolic representation can also be imbued with enormous meaning and thereby occasion visceral feelings, as has been the case with two pieces of wood whose formation constitutes a religious symbol, namely the cross. People, too, admit of symbolic representation. Owing to upbringing, even psychologically healthy individuals may reach adulthood with a wealth of visceral feelings that are positive toward some individuals and negative toward others. Most of us rarely act on our negative feelings alone.

The second part of the explanation for atrocities is that when a group of people act hostilely in concert with one another, the sense of moral responsibility that members of the group have is, from a psychological point of view, quite diffused. Indeed, it is surely true that no single person is responsible or blameworthy for all that happens. For example, what exactly has one done if one was part of a crowd of individuals who blocked the escape of an innocent person who was subsequently hanged or tortured by those pursuing that person? Moreover, not only does a crowd diffuse blame but it also provides individuals with a considerable measure of anonymity. Finally, in this vein, there is the fact that interpersonal comparisons are an ineluctable aspect of our self-assessment. Even if the way in which everyone is behaving is clearly wrong, the fact that everyone is so behaving is easily enough countenanced as an excuse for behaving in that manner. This is because the ubiquity of the wrongful behavior as evidenced suggests that only someone of unusual strength of character could be expected to refrain from the wrongful behavior in question; and while it is certainly nice that a person has such strength of character, no one can be expected to be that strong. In a word, one of the rationalizations for their own moral behavior, which many find most potent, is the simple reality that everyone is behaving in that manner.

Putting these two explanations together, atrocities can be explained as follows: When a group of people have been demonized, then the members of the demonized group have been symbolically represented as a profound danger to the physical and moral well-being of the group of individuals who consider they represent a higher moral order. Hitler, for example, claimed to be doing the work of the Lord in his attempt to exterminate Jews. Typically, the members of a demonized group are characterized as subhuman in some way or morally beyond the pale; accordingly, commonplace human sympathies toward members of the demonized group for the enormous pain inflicted upon such individuals are considered inappropriate, even a sign of weakness. When a group of people has been demonized, then it does not take much more than a social spark to occasion atrocities on the part of the members of the group who consider they represent a higher moral order. A social spark means something like the following: (a) one or more members of the demonized group have acted inappropriately toward a member of the group with the supposed higher calling when the members were, for instance, already weary of one another; or (b) the members of the group with the supposed higher calling question the fidelity of a particular member of their group. The slightest infraction on the part of a member of the demonized group thus presents an opportunity for one whose group loyalty has been questioned to publically affirm his or her disdain for the demonized group, while simultaneously affirming her or his identity with those who claim to have a higher calling.

Of course, atrocities can also be orchestrated. Those in Rwanda and Nazi Germany most certainly were orchestrated, and the systematic dehumanization of the victims was par for the course. What is equally true, however, is that atrocities can occur rather like spontaneous combustion. Lynching in the United States was much more like that than not.

One might think that individuals who have been members of a demonized group would never commit against others the kinds of wrongs that were committed against them. Unfortunately, this is not the case. People who have been demonized seem to be more than capable of demonizing others. The desire for revenge can blind people to their own ignominious behavior, as was the case in

Rwanda with the Hutus against the Tutsis. What is more, egregiously immoral behavior can be adopted as a means of control even by those who have been the primary target of such behavior. Joël Michel reports that lynching had become such a cultural practice in isolated areas of Louisiana that there were occasions when blacks would lynch a black, and there were 12 occasions when blacks joined with whites in lynching a black. Of course, these numbers are utterly insignificant when compared to the thousands of blacks lynched by whites only. However, these numbers underscore in a most poignant way that when it comes to atrocities, people can do the unthinkable. As Mark Rigg has shown, the same poignancy arises with people of Jewish descent willingly serving in Hitler's army.

Human Malleability

Philip Zimbardo's classic work, "A Study of Prisoners and Guards in a Simulated Prison," supports the line of argument presented in the preceding section. Student volunteers were variously assigned the role of guard or prisoner. The stunning surprise was that the "guards" began to take their role so seriously that they started mistreating the "prisoners" rather harshly—so much so that the experiment had to be stopped. Here we have an elite group of students who, beyond all shadow of a doubt, know that all are students who are equally innocent of any wrongdoing. Yet, the simple truth is that it was impossible for the so-called guards to take their role seriously without in some way demonizing the so-called prisoners, with the result being that otherwise decent and highly intelligent individuals willfully harmed individuals whom they knew from the outset were equally innocent and intelligent and from similar social backgrounds. The Zimbardo experiment points to the malleability of human beings. Even in a context that was publicly defined as mere role playing, among people who were equal in all the relevant social respects, the so-called guards began to think of themselves as having a higher moral calling. In turn, they viewed the so-called prisoners as morally inferior and proceeded to treat them quite harshly.

The malleability of human beings is both one of their greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. Its strength lies in the ability of human beings to adapt ever so successfully to environments that

differ radically from what they have previously experienced all of their lives—to achieve what had heretofore seemed impossible, as when Erik Weihenmayer, a blind person, climbed Mt. Everest. The liability is that these same creative powers make it possible for human beings to accord great significance to otherwise inconsequential differences, as Zimbardo's prison experiment astonishingly revealed. Evolutionary biology makes it unmistakably clear that phenotypical differences between human beings that allow for group classifications are utterly inconsequential, in that differences in moral and intellectual powers cannot be attributed to these phenotypical differences. Yet, with ingenuity and uncanny persistence human beings continue to accord great significance to these differences. Even in the 3rd millennium, what is known as scientific racism and the concomitant claim of racial superiority continue to have a serious foothold in human thought. One might ask whether we should take the ubiquity of racism on the part of human beings, with all that this entails in terms of humanity being susceptible to committing atrocities, as an indication of the equality of human beings.

Human Psychology: Justice Versus Evil

In *Republic*, Plato claims that the truly just are those who would live justly though the entire world treated them unjustly. Unfortunately, this is an ideal that would seem to be at odds with our psychological and social reality. This is because psychologically healthy human beings are quintessential social creatures, and this reality plays itself out in fundamental respects. First of all, social approval plays a fundamental role in how we conceive of ourselves. From physical appearances to intellectual prowess, the sense of self is inextricably tied to the assessments that others make of us.

What is more, there is unavoidable truth that there is much that is meaningful in life that cannot be done without the support of a community. The paradigm examples in this regard are friendship and love. Nearly everyone agrees that life without at least one of these is lacking in richness. However, there are many other communal activities that add to the meaning and richness of life, such as team sports or card games or group singing.

In the vast majority of instances, then, being part of a group is far too central to leading a psychologically healthy and flourishing life as a human being for Plato's idea of a just person to have an unshakable hold upon human lives. To recognize this much is to have deep insight into how it can be that psychologically healthy human beings commit atrocities. Contrary to what Plato thought, in order to be the kind of person who would choose justice over fitting in with those who have been a deep source of affirmation, it takes a strength of character (which most people do not have) and a willingness (which most people do not have) to make enormous sacrifices. And while we rightly admire saints and heroes, it is equally clear that we do not think that anyone can be morally required so to behave on behalf of others (with perhaps the case of immediate family members aside).

Fitting in with others is a form of self-preservation. Atrocities, then, tap into the most basic and fundamental of human instincts, namely self-preservation. This is because being a part of an affirming group is also one of the most basic forms of self-preservation. This follows from the fact that human beings are quintessentially social creatures. There is no need to deny that the difference between human beings and other social animals, such as dolphins and chimpanzees, is but a matter of degree. We need only note that small differences in degree can make a monumental difference in kind. The addition of language makes a profound difference. This is because atrocities are tied not just to feelings of hostility but also to the capacity of human beings to give articulation to those feelings and thus to proffer a symbolic representation of those feelings for other members of the community to embrace, avow, and thus for human beings to use as a ceremonious way of affirming their unity while simultaneously reinforcing their conception of the other as unfit. What is more, the corollary to the capacity for the spoken word is the capacity for the written word, which transforms the dissemination of ideas. Owing to these differences between animals and human beings, we do not regard animals as being capable of committing atrocities or, in any case, as capable of being morally responsible for their behavior. So it is even when, for example, we deem it appropriate to kill an animal for having mauled a human being to death.

Perhaps Plato may have the last word after all. He held that individuals could not be truly just unless, from the outset of their lives, they were entirely raised in just the right way. In the same way that defective buildings cannot be expected to survive major storms, people whose character formation is flawed cannot be expected to survive major moral storms. If this is right, then the explanation for why atrocities have been a painfully enduring part of human history is not so much that human beings have not had noble ideals. Rather, it is that in most societies it is profoundly rare that children have been raised with the kind of moral foundations that make it possible for them, once they reach adulthood, to weather major moral crises. In the absence of such a foundation, psychologically healthy people can do the unthinkable, namely be utterly indifferent to the humanity of another. In a word, Plato would say that atrocities exploit the fundamental moral imperfections of our upbringing.

Laurence Thomas

See also Death Squads; Disasters, Man-Made; Genocide; Holocaust; Lynching and Vigilante Justice; Massacres

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