HUMANITY

A Moral History of
the Twentieth Century

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Sometimes it is neither overwhelmed nor disconnected, but instead subverted. When terrible orders are given, some people resist because of their conception of who they are. But there may be no resistance when a person's self-conception has been built round obedience. In the same way, if someone's self-conception is built round a tribal identity or round some system of belief, resistance to tribal or ideological atrocities may have been subverted from within. A lot depends on how far the sense of moral identity has been narrowed to a merely tribal or ideological one. Again, seeing how this happens can prompt resistance.

Avoiding the kind of Belief that narrows the sense of identity means keeping scepticism alive. It means not distorting everything else to maintain a political or religious faith: not saving belief in Stalin by telling yourself Britain and France are the real aggressors against Hitler. It means, when under pressure to believe, staying alert to awkward evidence: noticing, like Jung Chang, that Mao's parents were heroes while other rich peasants were class enemies. It means not giving so much of yourself to Communism that you accept Palme Dutt's claim that a Communist has no private opinions apart from the collective thinking of the movement.

Another defence against the narrowing of moral identity is to keep tribal psychology under control. This means struggling, as Slavenka Drakulić did, to maintain an identity beyond being one of 4.5 million Croats. It means keeping alive the other commitments which enabled Dr Mujkanović to treat wounded Serbian soldiers in Srebrenica side by side with Bosnian ones.

To function as a restraint against atrocity, the sense of moral identity most of all needs to be rooted in the human responses. The chilling Nazi moral identity, built around hardness and the willingness to be cruel, is a clear warning. Franz Stangl, doing everything at Treblinka as well as he could, because 'that is how I am', did not lack a sense of moral identity, nor did Himmler, when he said that SS men should not steal a single fur or watch and that they had not been damaged in their soul, their character.

The two moral resources singled out here, the sense of moral identity and the human responses, are both needed as defences against atrocity, but the Nazi case brings out the primacy of the human responses. The humanity of the sense of moral identity is crucial. When severed from the human responses, or even hostile to them, it is useless or worse.

CHAPTER 43

Ethics Humanized

you have no God then your moral code is that of society. If society is ned upside down, so is your moral code. The communists made a virtue being beastly to each other.

Jung Chang, *Independent on Sunday* (10 September 1995)

e have seen the triumph of evil after the values of humanism have been ified and trampled on. The reason these values succumbed was probably they were based on nothing except boundless confidence in the human ellect. I think we may now find a better foundation for them, if only cause of the lessons we have drawn from our experience.

Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*

feature of our time is the fading of the moral law. The idea of a moral external to us may never have had secure foundations, but, partly se of the decline of religion in the Western world, awareness of this is widespread.

hose of us who do not believe in a religious moral law should still be bled by its fading. The evils of religious intolerance, religious cution and religious wars are well known, but it is striking how many sts against and acts of resistance to atrocity have also come from cipled religious commitment. (A handful of names: Bishop George Elizabeth Anscombe, Bishop von Galen, Pastor Braune, Bernard tenberg, André and Magda Trocmé and the villagers of Le Chambon, the bishops of Denmark in 1943.) The decline of this moral mitment would be a huge loss. If the decline of religion means this, Jung Chang's worrying thought, that if you have no God your moral is that of society, might be true.

Reconstructing Ethics

Not all sceptics about a non-human moral law see much to admire in Nietzschean amoralism. The alternative is to keep ethics afloat without external support. If there is no external moral law, morality needs to be humanized: to be rooted in human needs and human values. (These may of course include caring about other species.)

Morality interpreted in this way becomes tentative, exploratory and partly empirical. It is exploratory on the model of Socrates. Our deepest values are not just obvious. They are not all on the surface. Questioning and argument are needed to discover some of them. But ethics is also exploratory in a different, more empirical, way. It includes seeing the consequences of living by a code or set of values. A human disaster shows the need to think again about the values.

With disasters on the scale of some in the twentieth century, any ethical theory which either justifies them or can give no help in avoiding them is inadequate. The thought at Auschwitz and at other places, 'never again', is more compelling than any abstract ethical principle. (There is a parallel with a thought sometimes expressed about another part of philosophy: belief in the existence of the physical world is more compelling than belief in any philosophical theory which purports to disprove it.) If persuaded that an otherwise convincing ethical theory could justify the Nazi genocide, I should without hesitation give up the theory. In reconstructing ethics, revulsion against these things which people have done has a central place.

It is necessary to see the size and urgency of the problem. For those of us whose everyday life is in relatively calm and sheltered places, the horrors of Rwanda or Bosnia or Kosovo seem unreal. The atrocities can be put out of mind. The television news reports torture or a massacre and we feel relief when it moves on to political scandals or sport. We bystanders look away. Repressing each atrocity maintains the illusion that the world is fundamentally a tolerable place. Yet it is almost certain that, as you read this sentence, in some places people are being killed and in others people are being tortured.

Bystanders know enough to see that knowing more will be uncomfortable. Looking away, there is little sense of an enormous evil it is urgent to stop. The first step is not to look away. As Norman Geras has written in his fine book on this topic, 'Under the sign of a different moral reality, the duty would be to take the pain of thinking about these things. It would be to take it enough to feel obliged to act against them.'[1]

The moral resources give some hope of opposing atrocities with a strategy which fits human psychology. The sense of moral identity and the human responses are parts of our psychology, independent of any external metaphysics. The sense of moral identity is important, but in the prevention of atrocities it is reliable only when it is rooted in the human responses. At the core of humanized ethics are the human responses.

one obvious fact of recent history is that the human responses have failed to prevent these catastrophes. First, a sketch of the pattern of

the Human Responses Fail

propaganda of atrocity is often directed against the dignity of the [victim]s. There are acts which humiliate the victims, often accompanied by [a] joke. Such acts remove one of the main inhibitions against further [horro]rs. This was true both in Nazi Germany and in the Chinese Cultural [Revol]ution. And those responsible for atrocities are often people whose [own] dignity has not been respected. The persistent humiliation of [Lieu]tenant Calley in front of his men cannot have done much for his [willin]gness to respect the dignity of the Vietnamese villagers. And how [much] the world owes to the childhood humiliation of Hitler by his father [cann]ot be known for sure. It is not a universal truth that those to whom [evil is] done do evil in return, but it is true often enough, and Hitler is one [insta]nce. The spiral of vendetta in rival versions of 'bent twig' nationalism [inclu]des others.

[S]ympathy can also fail as a restraint. Sometimes people are trapped in [way]s which make it ineffective. The trap of Hobbesian fear can do this. So [do] military traps: the human responses of those trapped in the trenches [did] little to mitigate the horror. The same goes for the thought of the [avi]ator after his first bombing raid on Hamburg: 'What about those poor [people] under those fires?'

[S]ometimes sympathy is overwhelmed. This happens in combat with [emo]tional explosion or release. It can also be overwhelmed by pressures to [obe]y or conform, which is especially the effect of state terror. Under [Stali]n, Mao and Hitler, people were afraid to act on their generous [prote]ctive impulses. And people were trapped in moral dilemmas created [by th]reats to those they loved.

[S]ympathy can be defeated by Belief, of which the extreme case is the [delib]erately cultivated hardness of the Nazis.

[S]ympathy can be weakened or narrowed. It may be weakened by [dista]nce, either physical or psychological. When General Groves said that [the] atomic bomb 'went with a tremendous bang', he was thousands of [mile]s away from its victims. For Nazis, Jews were psychologically [dista]nced by being dehumanized. In the Cultural Revolution the victims [wer]e distanced by being seen as enemies of the people or as bourgeois. [Tri]balism and belief, by creating psychological distance, succeed in [cata]strophically narrowing the human responses, cutting them off to whole [gro]ups of people.

[S]ympathy can be eliminated through a sense of unreality. Combat on a [terra]in without a feature, where the landscape could be that of the moon,

where family, friends and neighbours seem to be a world away, creates this unreality. Auschwitz was another planet. Remoteness makes it natural to think all this is not really happening, I am not really doing this. People do not even have to go away. If war comes to you, this can sufficiently disrupt the everyday context in which horrors seem real. In the Terror during the French Revolution, 90 per cent of the executions took place in only twenty of the eighty-six departments of France. Apart from Paris, all those areas were war zones.[2]

There are common psychological patterns. The human responses are overwhelmed, weakened, narrowed or eliminated in ways which recur in Vietnam and Afghanistan; they recur in the use of the blockade, of area bombing and of the atomic bomb; they recur under Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. To see the unity in the underlying psychology is to make the development of 'a different moral reality' a more manageable task.

For many of us the catastrophes are remote from everyday life. It would be absurd for children's moral education to take as the main theme how not to become commander of a concentration camp. But, luckily, the ethics of preventing atrocities are an extension of the ethics of everyday life. At the supermarket people do not park in the disabled space partly because they do not want a disabled person to have the indignity and difficulty of struggling to carry groceries. They may also not want to be someone who is mean enough to cause this. The moral resources here are the same as those needed in the moral emergencies. It is a question of knowing and guarding against the ways in which they fail in those emergencies.

Breakthrough and the Moral Imagination

Most of all, the functioning of the human responses as a restraint requires the moral imagination. When Nixon and others planned the bombing of Cambodia, they sent death and suffering to people they hardly felt were real. In one way the psychology was like that of the people in Milgram's study who gave what they thought were electric shocks. They were more reluctant to give the shocks if the victims were visible. Without that, distance played its role. Neither Nixon nor those who gave the shocks to the unseen 'victims' had the moral imagination to overcome distance. This was also true of some of the hawks in the Cuba crisis. On the other hand, the imagination of Kennedy and the doves had been stimulated by being taught about the human effects of nuclear war. Emotional responses to the possible victims came alive.

Central to the moral imagination is seeing what is humanly important. When it is stimulated, there is a breakthrough of the human responses, otherwise deadened by such things as distance, tribalism or ideology. It

seeks conformity and obedience, bringing to the fore what matters humanly rather than the current norm or the official policy. It makes vivid the victims and the human reality of what will be done to them.

Sometimes the breakthrough is a simple emotional response, triggered by the visible reminder of someone's humanity: by the family letters and photographs of girlfriends found by soldiers in the pockets of those on the other side, or by seeing the fascist soldier holding up his trousers as he runs.

Sometimes the moral imagination involves both the emotions and the intellect. It can be stimulated by information, as in Kennedy's briefing about nuclear war. It can be stimulated by awareness of the effects of distance or of dehumanizing people, and a determination to resist those effects.

Questions and thinking are important for overcoming the effects of the social and technological division of labour. Take someone who works at a computer in a British company making aircraft. He may be relatively untroubled by knowing the aircraft are sold to Indonesia and then used for genocidal bombing. The victims are distant. The division of labour makes one person's contribution almost invisibly small.

The same British engineer at the computer might move to work in a country where punishments include being stoned to death. He would undoubtedly be horrified if asked to carry out a stoning. ('She committed adultery. All you have to do is pelt her with these heavy stones. Do not be put off by her screams, or by the blood, or by what the stones do to her face. Just keep going until she is dead.') The questions which need to be pressed are about the rationalizations which make the computer work seem so different. You would not do it alone, but would you take part in a collective stoning? Would you be the person who passes the stones to the killers? Would you help to make more punishments possible by inventing a remote-control technology for mass stoning?

Ethics Now

There are features of our time which make it particularly important to build up moral defences against barbarism. Most obviously, there is the way technology hugely increases the scale of atrocities. But there is the increasing awareness of the fading of the moral law. As authority-based morality retreats, it can be replaced by a morality which is deliberately created. The best hope of this is to work with the grain of human nature, making use of the resources of moral identity and the human responses. But changes and additions to common-sense attitudes will be needed. Many of these involve the social and personal cultivation of the moral imagination. To advocate this may sound like vague uplift with little

content. The truth is the opposite. Real cultivation of the moral imagination is a threat to many comforting conventional attitudes. It is likely, for instance, to destroy the conventional explanations of why what the computer engineer does is so different from the stoning.

If a humanized version of ethics is developed, people later will see the end of belief in the moral law as just a stage in the evolution of morality. But, if we do not start on man-made moral traditions, there will be a gap. Particularly in relations between groups, amoralism may start to seem the natural state. And, once this happens, the idea of starting inter-group morality may come to seem utopian.

EPILOGUE

The Past Alive in the Present

So long as the past and the present are outside one another, knowledge of the past is not of much use in the present. But suppose the past lives on in the present; suppose, though encapsulated in it, and at first sight hidden beneath the present's contradictory and more prominent features, it is still alive and active; then the historian may very well be related to the non-historian as the trained woodsman is to the ignorant traveller.

R.G. Collingwood, *Autobiography*

This book would not have been written without the belief that the past is alive in the present. It started with another sentence from R.G. Collingwood: 'The chief business of twentieth-century philosophy is to reckon with twentieth-century history.' The aim has been to participate in a little of that true business, taking Collingwood's sentence in the obvious way. This is the moment to apologize for taking Collingwood's remark out of context: he was urging philosophers to reckon, not with the events of the century, but with the practice of twentieth-century historians. Despite this, I like to think he would also have sympathized with the other interpretation. At the end of the autobiography he published in 1939 he described how his opposition to fascist irrationalism had made him see links between philosophy and politics: 'I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight.'

One way in which the past is alive in the present is in the use of precedent as a justification. Sir Arthur Harris used the First World War blockade as a precedent for his bombing policy in the Second World War. He also took the mass slaughter in the trenches as a precedent to avoid. Harris's policy made easier the fire bombing of Japan, which itself paved the way to the use of the atomic bomb. The First World War was alive at Hiroshima.

The past can live on as resentment, in the support given to the spiral of tribal hatred by historical narratives and by personal memories. More

generally, people are shaped by their experiences of public events. The influence of the First World War on Hitler's outlook is clear. There was his resentment that the war, whose outbreak made him ecstatic in the Odeonsplatz, ended in defeat and a humiliating peace. There was also his belief that the defeat came from betrayal, and the stimulus of his own experience of poison gas to suggest the form of revenge.

Keeping the past alive may help to prevent atrocities. There can be terrible significance in what some people expect others to forget. In a speech to SS men going to Poland, Hitler told them to kill men, women and children without pity. He suggested their acts would be forgotten: 'Who remembers now the massacres of the Armenians?' There is a chilling similarity between this and Stalin's comment while signing death warrants: 'Who's going to remember all this riff-raff in ten or twenty years' time? No one. Who remembers now the names of the boyars Ivan the Terrible got rid of? No one.'

At the other extreme, someone's conscience may be stimulated by awareness of a historical parallel. Hugh Thompson protected otherwise defenceless villagers at My Lai partly because he remembered the Nazis also shot people in ditches. Sometimes statesmen too want to avoid repeating the past. In the 1962 missile crisis, Khrushchev remembered the horrors of the Second World War and Kennedy wanted to avoid repeating 1914.

Most of all, there is the thought that patterns to be found in the past may tell us things helpful to know now. If so, Collingwood may have been right in his comparison between the historian and the trained woodsman.

Remember the absurdly simple view of the major political evils of the twentieth century which ascribed them all to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo. The reasoning was simple. No assassination, no First World War. If there had been no First World War, there would have been no Russian Revolution and so no Stalin. If there had been no German defeat in the war, there would have been no Hitler. Without Hitler, there would have been no Nazi genocide and no Second World War, no nuclear weapons and so no Hiroshima. Without Stalin or the Second World War, there would probably have been no Mao or Pol Pot.

This view is absurd, yet each part of the chain of reasoning is plausible. To rebut the view, we have to appeal to general tendencies. Without the assassination, the First World War as we know it would not have happened, but, with the arms race and the system of alliances as they were, there is a strong chance that a different First World War would have broken out later. (The military and political state of Europe in the early part of the century can be seen as a heap of combustible material. If one of the sparks flying around did not set it on fire, almost certainly another one would have done.) Without the First World War as we know it, there

might have been no Revolution in October 1917, but the state Russia was in created a strong chance of some kind of revolution.

As we get further from history as it did turn out, thinking gets more speculative. Would a different Russian Revolution have avoided Stalinism? Would a different First World War a year or two later have led to a German victory? Might Hitler have been killed in it? We have no way of answering these questions.

But, if we move still further back from history as it did turn out, we get to a region where some plausible suggestions again can be made. Just as early twentieth-century Europe can be seen as combustible material, so the psychology of the human species can be seen as having a strong propensity both for getting trapped into conflict and also for cruelty and mass killing. Twentieth-century wars, massacres and genocides come from combining this psychology with modern technology. Without Sarajevo, without Stalin or Hitler, it seems likely that the destructive technology would still have been developed and used. (Here, perhaps a grim nod is appropriate to Heidegger's phrase about the planetary encounter with technology.)

The psychology so visible in the twentieth century is a recurring one. The French Revolution gives striking instances. Fabre d'Eglantine produced a poster urging townspeople to 'let the blood of traitors be the first holocaust'. An exhortation by Jacques Roux makes him seem a precursor of Pol Pot: 'It is time that the liberty of the people was consolidated by the shedding of impure blood.' Humiliation of victims before atrocities was common and often included the cold joke. Before the execution of Louis XVI, the guards scrawled graffiti for him to see: pictures of a crowned figure hanging from a gibbet captioned 'Louis Taking a Bath in the Air', or a fat figure having just been guillotined. Only by fainting did Marie Antoinette escape being made to look at the head of one of her ladies-in-waiting stuck on a pike. On the counter-revolutionary side in the Vendée, atrocities included forcing chains of prisoners to dig their own graves before being shot over them.[2]

This cruel psychology seized on the technology of mass killing even in its early and primitive forms. There was the guillotine, with some people enjoying watching its operation while others kept bureaucratic records of those killed. In Nantes Jean-Baptiste Carrier had holes made in barges which could then be filled with bound prisoners for mass drownings in the Loire. Over 2,000 people were killed in what the cold joke of the day called 'republican baptisms' or 'the national bath'. There was the search for a more efficient technology. One revolutionary leader asked a distinguished chemist to look into 'mines, gassings or other means to destroy, put to sleep or asphyxiate the enemy'.[3]

Inhumanity can be seen here stretching from our own time back to the eighteenth century. Of course it goes back further. It goes as far back as we know. The Tollund Man, whose peat-preserved body was found near

Aarhus, had been executed in prehistoric times. In Northern Ireland in the 1970s Seamus Heaney wrote that he would go to Aarhus:

> Out there in Jutland
> In the old man-killing parishes
> I will feel lost,
> Unhappy and at home.[4]

But the French Revolutionary guillotine and the republican baptisms – and the interest in the possibilities of gassing – all show how naturally inhumanity combines with technology. No doubt the facts of twentieth-century history would have been different if the assassination of the Archduke had not taken place, but inhumanity would still have been combined with modern technology. It is hard to see that there was much chance to escape some variant of the bloody twentieth century we know.

To avoid further disasters, we need political restraints on a world scale. But politics is not the whole story. We have experienced the results of technology in the service of the destructive side of human psychology. Something needs to be done about this fatal combination. The means for expressing cruelty and carrying out mass killing have been fully developed. It is too late to stop the technology. It is to the psychology that we should now turn.

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