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The Difference Between Thinking and Action: the Failings of the Moral Resources

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I: Introduction

Humanity stands on the brink of the abyss in our moral world. At times, we are aware of the vastness that we stand next to, gazing over our shoulder. Other times, our back is completely turned away, in naïveté. The moment of truth comes, however, when we turn fully toward the brink. Do we choose to back away, respecting the ledge and its danger? Or do we loose ourselves in the abyss and fall in? In his awesome undertaking of a look at the acts of inhumanity that darkened the Twentieth Century, Jonathan Glover, examines situations where humanity is able to back away, or falls hopeless into the chasm. *Humanity* argues that there is a terrible black thread of “psychological weakness” (Glover, 43) that runs between the inordinate evils that occurred, tying them together as products of human failing. While the latter of this argument is certainly agreed with, there are question as to whether or not it is truly a psychological weakness or something more. Glover’s moral resources are at best, only necessary moral requirements to describe an average moral reaction to atrocity. One could honor the moral resources, be considered a moral entity, and nevertheless still be a bystander. Those who have acted in “exemplary” ways do much more than the average. I will argue that Glover’s resources are thus inadequate when taken alone, both as a description of those heroic cases, and as a prescription for how to ethically face atrocity.

II: On the Brink of the Abyss

To begin with, it is important to understand what Glover’s conception of the moral resources. In responding directly to “Nietzsche’s Challenge,” Glover posits the existence of the moral resources. Moral resources are human needs and psychological tendencies that either play to our moral identity, or to our “human responses” (Glover, 22). There are two types of human responses; respect and sympathy. Glover argues that respect and sympathy work both to describe the moral inclinations humans feel, and how they apply as preventative and staunching measures against immoral behavior. It is more difficult to commit an atrocity against others if they have dignity and respect (Glover, 23-24). Sympathy

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unites our experiences for what it is to suffer, with other humans, thus acting as a powerful emotional control mechanism (Glover, 24). Moral identity, Glover explains, is a series of either conscious or sub-conscious commitments that reflect a certain character that any given human may want to become (Glover, 26). These two divisions combine to become a strong deterrent to “ruthless selfishness” because of a greatly raised “psychological cost” (Glover, 27). Our human concern for the kind of person we may be perceived to be conflicts with a harmful self-interest, or damages what respect of ourselves or others, and what sympathy we feel with those who may be damaged by our self-interest. Glover admits that these measures can be eroded and repaired under different circumstances; “People slide by degrees into doing things they would not do if given a clear choices at the beginning” (Glover, 35). This allows for slow degradation of respect and sympathy, and this slide happens in such a way as to not initially conflict with a moral identity. Moreover, a person committing an immoral act can be jarred back into appropriate action, as the example of a policeman being prevented by beating a woman, by handing her the shoe she lost as he chased her (Glover, 37-38).

Be that as it may, Glover’s moral resources on their own are simply not enough to define the characteristics of a person who acted in an exemplary manner during an atrocity. In the recent Rwandan genocide, where 800,000 people lost their lives in a hundred days, an entire nation turned neighbor against neighbor with thousands of active participants in the killings all across the country. Thousands more sat by and watched the killings occur in their own backyards. Worse still, the brutal slaughter continued on in the full glare of the world’s eyes, and nations shook their heads and did nothing. To keep from having to become involved, “the United States along with most other governments, simply avoided using the word” (Ghosts of Rwanda, 2004).

Yet, following Glover’s moral resources, these parties can proclaim to be moral entities, and remain guiltless bystanders. A civilian can stand by, feel respect for those who are being butchered, feel physical pain in sympathy, know that the killing is wrong and not want to be a party to it, and still do nothing. This bystander may even have a valid excuse—as described by David Jones in his work on the characters of the participants, victims and bystanders in the Holocaust—being “prevented from acting by a lack of opportunity” (Jones, 215). A valid excuse allows the bystander to cognitively recognize that he would, under appropriate circumstances, normally not be a bystander—or act to help a person in need. However, due to prevailing circumstances, some “lack” of opportunity, the bystander in question is prevented from acting, out of fear for life and limb, or lack of resources to help. This bystander can maintain

all his moral resources intact; he may feel awful, or even guilty by not intervening, but the resources have not faltered.

This is inadequate to describe those few who acted exemplary. One example is of Philippe Gaillard, a Red Cross doctor in the capital of Rwanda during the genocide. He chose to make the news of the genocide public, despite the possibility of serious retribution and harm (*Ghosts of Rwanda*, 2004). The consideration of the threat of serious harm is a valid excuse for not helping (Jones 215), yet Gaillard finds himself compelled to help—beyond his foundation of moral resources: In such circumstances, if you don't at least speak out clearly; you are participating to, to the genocide, I mean, if you just shut up when you see what you see. And morally, ethically, you *cannot* shut up. It's your *responsibility* to talk. To speak out. (*Ghosts of Rwanda*, 2004, emphasis mine)

Gaillard's self-description about how it feels to be merely a bystander and not react gets at the core issues to Glover's resources as a descriptive explanation of human moral action. Gaillard feels the moral resources; he works to save lives, not take them. However, it is not just sympathy or respect, it is a *responsibility* to human life. Jones refers to these actors as "supererogatory;" going "above and beyond" average behavior, often disregarding danger to oneself (Jones, 222). Gaillard is certainly an example of this; he raised awareness of the horrors occurring around him, stayed when many others had left, and once even directly confronting the then extremist leader to stop the killings (*Ghosts of Rwanda*, 2004). Even though he was rebuffed, Gaillard is still to be commended; he at least *tried*.

Acting is an important part of becoming more than a bystander in an atrocity. And the moral resources fail to prescribe *how* to behave when faced with a morally trying situation. One particularly challenging example is that of the case of My Lai, when members of the U.S. army Charlie company murdered nearly 500 unarmed old men, women, and children, in an extended period of four hours. The company had sustained four killed and thirty-eight wounded before the attack, and was ordered to show aggression when storming the village, which was believed to hold a Viet Cong stronghold. This is a grueling case because U.S. military service members are supposed to be *trained* to do exactly the opposite of the case that occurred during the event. If soldiers are trained to spare innocents, and were backed up by their moral resources, how could have this atrocity occurred?

The answer lies firmly in the case that the moral resources simply are inadequate to prescribe action. Glover exclaims the case of the 120 soldiers moral failing is due to the very fact they received orders to be aggressive, and that they experienced strong peer pressure to conform

(Glover, 59). Nevertheless, there are examples of their peers who did not participate in the slaughter (Glover, 59). One such example is that of Hugh Thompson, a reconnaissance helicopter pilot, who, when seeing the massacre the American soldiers were propagating, landed his chopper in between a fleeing group of Vietnamese and a band of advancing soldiers. He ordered his gunner to open fire on the advancing troops if they attempted to shoot at the civilians.

Thompson not only risked his own life, but also defied pressures of conformity, and the commands of a superior officer to do the right thing. His moral resources alone did not prevent the further killings of innocents, but the *action* he took. Jones refers to those who feel obligated to help, to pursue the correct course of action, because of a strong sense of moral duty. Acting against, or not acting in these cases is impossible; “their sense of integrity will not allow it” (Jones, 223). Hugh Thompson’s actions are seen as the highest moral regard. In William Eckhardt’s discussion of the massacre, the resolution about a prescribed course of action in the face of atrocity is clear: “ACT LIKE HUGH THOMPSON” (Eckhardt). It is not enough to simply recognize and acknowledge atrocity, but regardless of the possible consequences to life and limb, take action against atrocity; it is the best moral course of action.

III: The Fog

Of course, situations where a genocide is occurring, or armed men are gunning down innocent civilians are not black and white. It could probably be argued, and I feel rightly so, that these atrocities occur simply *because* they are not clear-cut. But this is an argument for a different paper. However, this does place the moral resources into an interesting predicament. Glover argues that individually, the parts of his moral resources: moral identity and moral human responses of respect and sympathy, cannot hold back the unfortunate and innate pull of the abyss on humanity (Glover, 403-404); “to function as a moral restraint against atrocity, the sense of moral identity most of all needs to be rooted in the human responses” (Glover 404).

It could be argued that my thesis, in the same way as Glover’s, falls short. The moral resources are at best only a starting place. Having them does not prevent genocide or massacre. Having them does not stop a moral soldier from shooting a child. And if this is true, then how can the moral resources prevent a moral being from simply standing by and doing nothing?

The difference is in a *responsibility to action*. As Philippe Gailard began to treat victims, the aid workers would occasionally have to leave the country because the gross inhumanity made them “crazy; but, then you find other people, who [are] able to take risks, and to do the

very little things you can do. Which are always miracles. Do miracles. In such contexts it's the only way to do something I guess" (Ghosts of Rwanda, 2004). To be effective as descriptions for the exemplary actors, to be prescriptive for their behavior, the moral resources need another component. They fail as the Red Cross failed during the Holocaust, as the soldiers' training failed during My Lai, as the world failed as the killing continued for days and weeks and months in Rwanda.

IV: Conclusion

Alone, Glover's moral resources are simply inadequate to describe how those who act exemplary in the face of atrocities are able, and is inadequate to prescribe to others how to act in the face of an atrocity. The moral resources are, at best, only a necessary component of a moral being. In Rwanda, despite the overwhelming events, there were people, able to see the abyss before them, and step away. They helped save people, at risk of life and limb. They continued to persevere even as the tide of bodies and maimed poured over them. They felt strongly the moral resources, but they also felt a responsibility to speak out. In My Lai, a single pilot placed himself between advancing American soldiers and the innocent Vietnamese civilians they were going to kill. Hugh Thompson would not have acted had he lacked the moral resources, but he would not have acted if he had not felt a duty, an obligation to stop the killing. He watched as the men around him succumbed to the abyss that haunts humanity.

Inside each of us, there is a capacity for evil—for death and destruction. For wanton lust of violence and cruelty. This is countered by the knowledge we have, and our *moral obligation to the other members of humanity*. This is not just caring for them, or respecting them, even if we do not like them. This is a genuine concern for the well being of others. This is the tether that prevents most from falling into the abyss at our backs.

References

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