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Ruddick, Sara, 1935-

Hypatia, Volume 18, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 212-222 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

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FORUM

The Moral Horror of the September Attacks

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I try to identify the distinct moral horror occasioned by the attacks of September 11 in order to accord them an appropriate, limited place in the ongoing history of terror and violence. I consider the agents of evil and the victims as evil constructs them. I conclude with victim stories that reveal evil by showing the goodness it violates, making us feel the bitter loss of what violence has killed, kills, and will kill again.

The attacks of September 11 caused, and could be expected to cause pain, injury, and death; terror and grief. The victims of the attacks had no distinctive relation to the attackers, no grounds for predicting attack, no means of protecting themselves or others. These attacks were undeniably terrible. Were they also evil?

The attacks have been called “evil” since the day they occurred. “Today” the president announced to the nation on September 11, “thousands of lives were despicably ended by evil” (Bush, 2001. Almost immediately America was called to a Manichean struggle of “good versus evil” (Bush, 2002a). By the time of his state of the union address Bush had identified three “states . . . [and] their terrorist allies that constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world, by seeking weapons of mass destruction. . . .” (2002b). “Evil” could be invoked to justify military attack, plans for using nuclear weapons, and oppressive “homeland security.”

Two lines of argument might undermine this rhetoric. One suggests, rightly I believe, that policies and attitudes of recent U. S. governments fueled the
hatred that fueled the attacks and gathered their supporters. To put the matter crudely, “America got what it deserved.” While I agree that U. S. policies have been destructive and might well fuel hatred, on my view no one deserves losses and harms like those of September 11. Nor can “America” get its due by an attack on individuals present by chance, even if many among them were Americans.

A second argument finds the September attacks insignificant when compared to other evils: deaths in the thousands rather than the millions, an assault of only half a day, quick death by force and fire rather than by extended torture and humiliation. The attacks seem almost trivial compared to evils of the holocaust, slavery, and apartheid; to many massacres and much extended suffering under brutal tyrannical rule. As bombings go, driving highly fueled passenger planes into particular buildings could seem a lesser evil than nuclear, carpet, cluster, and fire bombings. As harms go, a terrible assault may be less evil than undramatic, cumulative policy decisions that deprive children of the food and education they need.

Evils differ in degree and kind. A sense of perspective is important. But in comparing evils we may trivialize or excuse the “lesser,” thereby inuring ourselves to great suffering. What matters is the specificity of moral horrors, of evil, of anyone’s pain and loss. In 1946, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt corresponded about their shared difficulty in thinking about the great and terrible wrongs of Nazi rule. (Arendt and Jaspers 1992) Though they were thinking about evils so great that they have come to stand for evil itself, I find their correspondence helpful in thinking about the more limited evil of the September attacks.¹

Arendt, who had been reading Jaspers on the question of German guilt, wrote: the “Nazi crimes . . . explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness” (1992, 54). Jaspers replied:

A guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt takes on a streak of “greatness”—of satanic greatness—which is for me as inappropriate to the Nazis as all the talk about the “demonic” element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we must see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality because that’s what truly characterizes them. . . . I regard any hint of myth or legend with horror and everything unspecific is just such a hint (1992, 62).

In her reply Arendt admitted that she came “dangerously close to that “satanic greatness” that I, like you, totally reject.” Still, she said, there was a difference between an ordinary murderer and people who “built factories to produce corpses.” But “One thing is certain. We must resist the impulse to mythologize the horrible” (1992, 69).
This correspondence contains a double warning both against mythologizing “the horrible” and against denying the distinct horrors of what is done or suffered. Since September 11 the danger of mythologizing, even clinging to, the horrible has been evident. It has been harder to grasp the distinct moral horror of the attacks or even to appreciate the difficulty of that task. Unnamed moral horror festers in the imagination, ready to trigger dangerous dreams of righteous home security and global order. By looking at the attacks with the aim of seeing their “evil,” I hope that we can begin to accord them an appropriate limited place in the ongoing practice of political violence and terror.

“Evil” refers to a relationship between evildoers who inflict terrible harm and victims who suffer it. When Hannah Arendt spoke of the banality of evil she was initially talking about the banality of an evil person, Adolph Eichmann, and his mind (Arendt 1971; 1978, vol. 1). When she spoke of radical evil as “making human beings as human beings superfluous” (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 166; Arendt 1958b) she was speaking of victims as evil constructs them. I look first at the evildoers of 9/11, then at the victims as they are constructed by evil, and finally at victim stories that reveal the attacks as evil by revealing the ordinary good they violate.

In the case of the September attacks, identifying evildoers is politically charged. Nineteen hijackers were the direct agents of the attacks. Osama bin Laden founded, funds, and perhaps directs the transnational, militarist al-Qaeda network that allegedly trained and supported the attackers. Both in a recorded interview and in a videotape discovered in Afghanistan and translated, edited and released by the Bush administration, bin Laden takes pleasure in the attacks. He does not, however, claim responsibility, and he reveals limited knowledge of the operation (bin Laden 2001a, 2001b). The Taliban regime “harbored” bin Laden as well as camps and training centers of al-Qaeda. The regime and bin Laden were closely connected, ideologically, financially, and personally through the Taliban leader Mohammed Omar (Der Spiegel 2001, 2002). But the Taliban’s relation to the pilots and their attacks, and the attackers’ dependence on this particular regime is unclear. Officially bin Laden and the Taliban regime had to be included among the agents of evil in order to justify retaliatory violence against Afghanistan. In my view neither the attacks nor any evil associated with them justified the retaliatory violence but I argue that elsewhere. I will consider the four pilots as the primary agents of “evil.” They organized the hijacking and carried it out. I include bin Laden and his associates because they were likely facilitators of the attacks and because they take such lively pride as well as pleasure in them. The Taliban regime was evidently brutally misogynist, cruel, and repressive. When I argue against the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan I take the Taliban’s clear, serious crimes into account. But that is not my subject here.
The pilots were “ordinary men” of their culture and also “fanatics” enthralled by a system of belief and acting righteously in its terms. Both characteristics are now familiar, if also contrary aspects of evildoers. These ordinary enough fanatics fulfilled one conventional requirement for evildoing. They acted deliberately, planning and training for over two years in order to create the destruction they desired and that three of the four achieved. In this they were like disciplined soldiers willingly, deliberately setting out to injure and kill.3

Among other characteristics of evildoing I find two especially repellant: “gratuitous cruelty” and “cheerful indifference.” “Gratuitously cruel” evildoers humiliate and torture, often with evident pleasure and excitement, and without any practical purposes such as control or gathering information. The dragging murder of James Byrd Jr. and the slow tortured killing of Matthew Shepard were gratuitously cruel. “Cheerfully indifferent” evildoers may delight in getting their victims or in the numbers killed but are otherwise indifferent to suffering. The success of their undertaking is a source of pleasure, often expressed in the context of happy sociability. Exultant high-altitude bombers giving each other the high five sign are a familiar example. The photographic record of white people enjoying themselves at a lynching provides an example cheerful indifference, and also many of the photographs of hanging bodies provide evidence of excited, gratuitous cruelty (Allen et al. 2000).

The 9/11 pilots seem neither “gratuitously cruel” nor “cheerfully indifferent.” They intended to kill (or to have their assistants kill) anyone who stood in the way of their mission. But no evidence exists of their taking pleasure in people’s suffering. I have heard people say one pilot’s suggestion that passengers make farewell calls was cruel, though he himself allegedly placed such a call, and the tone of these instructions is as yet unclear (Der Spiegel 2001, 2002). A “Terrorists’ Manual,” which the pilots may have studied in some version or other, includes “guidelines for beating and killing hostages.” These acts are aimed at getting information or punishing those who withhold it. This is not gratuitous cruelty however terrible it may be, but the infliction of pain to achieve certain purposes (Der Spiegel 2001, 2002, 297–98; see also Makiya and Mneimneh 2002).

Far from being cheerfully indifferent, the pilots seem to have taken their mission and coming death with intense seriousness. According to the “primer for terrorists on a suicide mission” they exulted in the rewards awaiting them after death, (“Angels are calling your name and wearing their finest clothes for you”) (Der Spiegel 2001, 2002, 311). This attitude is quite different from the worldly pleasure in destruction that I am calling cheerful indifference.

By contrast, bin Laden does provide an example of indifferent cheerfulness. In the videotape discovered in Afghanistan, he and his associates delight in the pilots’ success. They tell how they calculated in advance the number of
victims and the destruction they could expect, and were happy to have their expectations exceeded. “They were overjoyed when the first plane hit the building so I said to them be patient” (bin Laden 2001b, 320). “Do you know when there is a soccer game and your team wins” one associate asks, “it was the same expression of joy” (2001b, 319). Bin Laden takes pleasure in death and destruction in apparently the same spirit as he takes pleasure in gaining new converts to Islam.

In the videotape, bin Laden does not seem gratuitously cruel nor for the most part do his associates. But one speaker, apparently quoting from the Koran, says, “Allah will torture them, with your hands, he will torture them” (2001b, 318). The remark seems at odds with the conversation that exudes pleasure and a sense of triumph but does not have the ring of sadistic energy and excitement so common in accounts of other evils.

While the pilots and even more bin Laden can be seen as evil, the moral horror of the attacks emerges more clearly in the construction of the victims. Victims of evil are often identified as of a “kind” or with their nation states. In the attacks the “kinds” were infidels, Jews, and crusaders, the state America, its allies, and by implication, Israel. Various racisms justify lethally harming “kinds” of individuals. “Kinds” become killable enemies in wars that fuel and are fueled by racism. Bin Laden has justified killing Americans as a “kind” because of particular policies; for example, “sending tens of thousands of troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques” (1998a), or more generally because “the U.S. government is unjust, criminal and tyrannical . . . has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous and criminal whether directly or through its support of the Israel occupation . . .” (1997). And . . . “Just as they are killing us, we must kill them” (2001a). He also believes that “enmity against the Jews . . . is deep rooted” and that America supports Jews in an inevitable war (for example, see, bin Laden 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001a, 2001b).

The pilots, if their Primer is to be trusted, also thought they were killing a kind—“the Unfaithful,” “the Infidels.” But the people who would become the victims on the planes and in the buildings are curiously absent from reports about the pilots and from their preoccupied self-reflections in the primer. It is as if victims who were nothing but a “kind” became victims who were merely fungible accessories to a plan that inevitably involved the death of passengers and office workers whoever they might be. To paraphrase Simone Weil, in those planes, in those buildings, “they were nothing. They simply did not count” (Weil, in Panichas, 1977, 56).6

This nothingness of victims, in its different forms, is familiar from the greater evils of the concentration camp, slavery, and war. Human beings “as human beings are totally superfluous” (Arendt in Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 166; Arendt 1958b). They are constructed as “objects of property” (Patricia Williams 1991, chap. 12), transformed by sheer “force that turns anyone who is
subjected to it into a thing” (Weil in Miles 1986, 163). The “innocence” of victims is also entirely negative. Their moral lives and character are irrelevant to the harm suffered. In the midst of attacks in which they do not count, someone stealing from their parents’ savings is no less innocent than someone taking on extra work to support them. This is a metaphysical innocence “beyond goodness or virtue” (Arendt in Arendt and Jaspers, 1992, 544).

The construction of people as nothing is almost never entirely successful. Victims escape the bounds, the definitions that evil gives them. Victims who live amidst evil often speak with anguish of ways they resisted or failed to resist, of strategies of survival that bordered on complicity. But except for an apparently successful effort by passengers and crew to crash the plane that went down in Pennsylvania, the victims of September 11 seem to have had no time for resistance and nothing to resist. The September attacks provoked other kinds of story.5

In the predominant Trade Towers story, strangers helped strangers out of the burning, collapsing buildings. Some were fulfilling the responsibilities of their work in life-threatening circumstances amidst chaos that made action nearly impossible. Over three hundred rescue workers died. Some stranger/helpers were amateurs. Office workers carried wheelchair bound people down eighty floors; someone on his way down stopped to pull a person out from beneath a chunk of a plane’s fuselage; someone directed people into elevators and down stairwells then went back to direct others (Dwyer et al. 2002).

In a second story people who knew they were going to die called on cell phones or left messages on e-mails and answering machines. Some of the callers are terrified, others move from hope to silence. As reported, remembered, and sometimes recorded, the dominant theme of the messages was affection and love. From a Trade Tower e-mail: “I don’t think I am going to get out. You’ve been a really good friend.” From United Flight 93: “She called to tell me that she loved me, loved me dearly, and to tell the boys that she loved us. . . . All that she was going through, . . . To call me to tell me she loved me is embedded in my head” (Clines 2001). Allowing for editing and embroidering, I hear in these messages what Simone Weil read in scenes of love portrayed in The Iliad:

A sudden evocation, as quickly rubbed out, of another world, the far away precarious, touching world of peace, of the family, [of home] the world in which each [person] counts more than anything else for those about him [or her]” . . . these moments of grace are rare . . . but they are enough to make us feel with sharp regret what violence has killed and will kill again” (Weil in Miles 1986, 164, 168).
As I read them, these two kinds of victim story reveal the particular moral horror of the September attacks by reflecting them in a mirror of ordinary goodness where people “count.” In the first story people respond to need with help, creating in extraordinary circumstances an ordinary relationship in which rescuer and rescued are necessary, not superfluous, actors, not things, people who matter. In the second story the “good” is expressed in ordinary love, affection, “attachments.” People who were counted as nothing count absolutely as some one, count for and to someone. Evil is revealed not in the absence of this good but in its terrible violation; an “agonizing separation” that is deliberately, suddenly and indifferently inflicted.9

To Weil’s evocation of the far-away world of “family” and “peace” I added “home.” For Iris Young and Nel Noddings, “home” is both a material dwelling place and a critical value (Young 1997; Noddings 2002). I take “home” to be one metaphor and symbol for values of “care.” Feminists have insisted on the dangers of a romantic, nostalgic ideal of “home.” For many people, poverty prevents and violence mocks the idea of a dwelling place. Where it can exist “home” often legitimates the exploitation of women whose work makes home possible, and subjects the most vulnerable inhabitants to assault, domination, and sexual abuse. At its domestic best, “home” is likely to exclude the “other/stranger” both in fact and in fantasy.

Home can be undeniably terrible, even distinctly evil. And (not “but”) home can also be “the site of the construction and reconstruction of one’s self” (Young 1997, 163), a place where pain is never regarded as deserved, (Noddings 2002, 147), where calls for help are answered by “I am here” (Noddings 2002; for example, page 129), individuals can feel safe and secure (Young, 1997, 161), people “hold each other in personhood” (Nelson 2002) and the stranger/other is greeted cautiously but with respect.10 The values of “home” can be destroyed on factory floors, in prisons and mind-numbing schools, through “terrorist” violence and terrifying war. They can be destroyed at home. But they were not destroyed in the September attacks.

Nor did these values in any sense triumph. The September attacks are about damage and loss; intimate, emotional, social, and political loss. The victim stories are stories, true enough tales of what some people did. They express certain values, but they do not console. Instead they offer one way of beginning to grasp the moral horror we have witnessed and to feel the bitter loss of what violence has killed, now kills and will kill again.
Notes

This paper was difficult to write. I have relied on editing and conversation with people whose views often differed markedly from mine: Carol Ascher, Carol Cohn, Jane Lazarre, Hilde Nelson, William Ruddick, Marilyn Young, and especially Elizabeth Minnich.

1. I use Hannah Arendt’s and Karl Jaspers’s Correspondence (Arendt and Jasper 1992) as a principal source of Arendt’s views. I find this correspondence between friends a heartening model of how people might speak to each other. In this particular discussion, the two are explicitly speaking of crime and guilt. Arendt sponsored the publication of Jaspers’s Schuldfrage despite her disagreements with his views (see Jaspers 1947, 2000). For want of space I have left out Jaspers’ comparison of evil to natural phenomena (he mentions bacteria) which do terrible harm.

2. I am assuming a secular stance. Neither God nor Progress nor any other metaphysical good sets a “problem” of evil. In asking about the “evil” of the attacks I read about great evils. I found three books especially useful: Inge Clendinnen’s Reading the Holocaust, (1999), Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (2000), a photographic collection which has a bibliography and accompanying essays, and Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa (1999). I found Arendt’s writings on evil indispensable; and of the many writings on Arendt, I found most helpful Richard Bernstein’s “Did Arendt change her mind: From radical evil to the banality of evil?” (1997).

3. I select the pilots because it is possible to compare them to other bomber pilots and to other soldiers. Also, they clearly knew what they were doing whereas the other hijackers may have been vague about their mission. Mohamed Atta, Marwan al-Shehhi, Ziad Jarrah, and (presumably) Hani Hanjour differ from each other enough to discourage psychological analyses of “terrorists” but not enough to require drawing moral distinctions concerning their “evil”). “Facts” about the pilots are continually revised and new facts emerge. Any story I tell now will be outdated by the time it is read. I have learned about the pilots by reading the New York Times, including the archives, by using Google as a search engine on the Web, and briefly by subscribing to Web versions of other newspapers. However, every “fact” I cite about the pilots can be found in Inside 9-11:What Really Happened compiled by Reporters, Writers and Editors of the weekly magazine, Der Spiegel (Der Spiegel 2001; American edition with foreword 2002). This book includes a document labeled by Der Spiegel “Primer for Terrorists on Suicide Missions” (2002, 307–13) that I refer to as “The Primer.” This document was found, among other places, in Atta’s suitcase that didn’t make his connection. The document was discussed by Brian Wittaker in The Guardian, 1 October 2001, and under the title “Manual for a ‘Raid’” by Kannan Makiya and Hussan Mneimneh in the New York Review of Books, 17 January 2002. These three discussions differ markedly. Inside 9-11 also includes excerpts from “A Manual for Terrorists” (2002, 262–304) found on a computer of an al-Qaeda member in Manchester England. I refer to it as “The Manual.” I have read favorable reviews of Inside 9-11 and an historian from Hamburg has vouched for the reliability of Der Spiegel, a weekly magazine. Although it is a popular book, Inside 9-11 seems more careful and complete than anything else I have read.

4. In contrast to the pilots, bin Laden’s views are known. He has spoken in
interviews, on Al-Jazeera television, and on a videotape found in Afghanistan and then translated, edited, and published by the Bush administration. The interviews are available on the Web along with many articles about bin Laden, some written before, some after the attacks (see, for example, bin Laden 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001a, 2001b).

5. The pilots are taken to be “fanatics,” people who (mis)take their presumed evil for righteousness because they are enthralled by a system of beliefs, religious or political, and perhaps by a leader. Bin Laden seems governed by a system of beliefs and also by hatred and anti-semitism to a degree that the pilots may not have been. It is now widely recognized that evildoers can be “ordinary men” of their culture. I take the phrase from Christopher Browning’s Ordinary Men (1992), but the view is often associated with Hannah Arendt’s account of Eichmann. In 1945, long before the Eichmann trial, Arendt wrote: “The reality is that ‘the Nazis are men like ourselves’; the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what men are capable of” (Arendt 1994, 134). I do not however read her as saying that Eichmann was “ordinary” but rather that he had a “curious quite authentic inability to think” (Arendt 1971, 417, italics added).

6. Simone Weil’s writing is central to my thinking, but I neither use nor understand her explicit discussion of evil. For me her central texts are “Factory Work” and “Iliad: Poem of Force,” both of which I cite here, as well as “The Love of God and Affliction” and “Human Personality” (These and other important writings are in Panichas 1977 though I use a translation of “Iliad” by Mary McCarthy found in Miles 1986.) The words “Here, you are nothing. You simply do not count” are from “Factory Work” in Panichas 1977, 56.

7. I am paraphrasing Arendt (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 544) though she was speaking of innocence in the face of the gas chambers.

8. I have mentioned only two kinds of victim story, both widely told. I have selected easily accessible examples. The ideal of stranger/helper is neither ‘masculine’ nor ‘feminine’ but in the victim stories the firefighters in particular were cast as heroes who gave “masculinity” a good name.

9. Claire Kahane (2001, 164–65) has written critically about uses of maternal metaphors and what she calls a “feminine ideal of intimacy” to represent trauma and suffering. I agree with her that the ideal has been cast as “feminine” though men as well and as much as women expressed and responded to it.

10. In this discussion, Iris Young’s (1997) and Nel Noddings’s (2002) idea of “home” along with Hilde Nelson’s (2002) idea of “holding each other in personhood” are critical oppositional concepts that enable us to identify and reject the attitude of “counting people as nothing.” Apart from my purposes, these writers differ markedly from each other.
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