Response Essays

"Statistics Don't Bleed": Rhetorical Psychology, Presence, and Psychic Numbing in Genocide Pedagogy

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Desperate to make present the unfolding Holocaust in central Europe, Arthur Koestler in a 1944 article in the *New York Times Magazine* grouped himself with the "screamers" who were unheard as millions were murdered in the concentration camps.[1] Seeking to explain why "a dog run over by a car upsets our emotional balance and digestion; three million Jews killed in Poland cause but a moderate uneasiness," Koestler observed: "Statistics don't bleed; it is the detail which counts. We are unable to embrace the total process of our awareness; we can only focus on little lumps of reality" (*Yogi* 92). Matthew J. Newcomb struggles in his classroom and recent article, "Feeling the Vulgarity of Numbers: The Rwandan Genocide and the Classroom as a Site of Response to Suffering," with the problem he, Koestler, and a host of others face when attempting to move people to moral action in response to trauma that may seem beyond the pale of representation.

Embellishing Koestler's claim that "statistics don't bleed," Newcomb argues that numbers themselves are "vulgar" because they "fail to evoke either strong affective responses that images often do or the potent feelings that go with stories" (178). In considering the problem of statistics and numbers as barriers to an ethical response to suffering, Newcomb raises key questions and advances the conversation about how scholars

and teachers of rhetoric and writing studies should set forth a genocide pedagogy. We seek to join and extend this conversation in an act of collaboration between a scholar of rhetoric and scholars of social psychology. A genocide pedagogy designed for students of rhetoric and writing, we argue, should be founded on the emerging discipline of rhetorical psychology, which blends the best of both fields.

Newcomb draws from his classroom experience and the journal entries offered by his students to reflect on the role of affect and emotion in response to the suffering of others. He and his students seek to understand the genocide in Rwanda, and the meaning of the 800,000 deaths. Newcomb's students, in their journals, reflect on their encounter with genocide, eliciting queries about the very possibility of representing the enormity of genocide, the numerical representations of trauma and affect, the problem of attention, and the ethical obligations prompted by genocide. Although we diligently compile the statistical measures of harm, Newcomb notes, "nothing is more difficult to measure than suffering" (177).

Our aspiration is to build from his essay to offer insights that might contribute to this most important effort. Accordingly, we develop four extensions of Newcomb's essay. First, we believe the questions Newcomb raises are best addressed by the field of rhetorical psychology. The field yokes the concerns of rhetoric with those of psychology toward the end of understanding the dialogic nature of thought and social expression, and begins with an appreciation of the role played by affective psychology in decision making and judgment. Second, the rhetorical notion of "presence" lurks in the center of questions posed in Newcomb's essay and could serve as the theoretical anchor of a genocide pedagogy. Third, research conducted by social psychologists on concepts of affect, moral intuitions, and psychic numbing could anchor the social-psychological principles necessary for an effective response to genocide. Fourth, because moral intuitions inevitably fail to motivate us to prevent genocide, we believe rhetoricians and social psychologists should join forces to develop a second mechanism to address the problem, which Paul Slovic argues is based on the human capacity to reason and argue ("More Who Die"). In short, when psychic numbing disables moral intuition, moral argument (rhetoric) is needed, and this rhetoric should be grounded in the insights offered by social psychology and anchored in the framework of law.

Affective Psychology

Underlying Newcomb's essay is the recognition that great effort is made to assess and communicate the size and scope of losses and suffering in disasters. This assumes that people can understand the resulting numbers and act on them appropriately. However, much recent behavioral research casts doubt on this fundamental assumption. Many people do *not* understand large numbers. Indeed, large numbers have been found to lack meaning and to be underweighted in decisions unless they convey *affect* (feeling). As a result, there is a paradox that rational models of decision making fail to represent. On the one hand, we respond strongly to aid a single individual in need. On the other hand, we often fail to prevent mass tragedies such as genocide or take appropriate measures to reduce potential losses from natural disasters. This occurs, in part, because as numbers get larger and larger, we become insensitive; numbers fail to trigger the emotion or feeling necessary to motivate action.

The search to identify a fundamental mechanism in human psychology that causes us to ignore mass murder and genocide draws upon a theoretical framework that describes the importance of emotions and feelings in guiding decision making and behavior. Perhaps the most basic form of feeling is affect, the sense (not necessarily conscious) that something is good or bad. Positive and negative feelings occur rapidly and automatically—note how quickly feelings associated with the word "joy" or the word "hate" are elicited. A large research literature in psychology documents the importance of affect in conveying meaning upon information and motivating behavior. Without affect, information lacks meaning and won't be used in judgment and decision making (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, and Welch; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, and MacGregor; Zajonc).

Affect plays a central role in what are known as "dual-process theories" of thinking. As Seymour Epstein has observed: "There is no dearth of evidence in everyday life that people apprehend reality in two fundamentally different ways, one variously labeled intuitive, automatic, natural, non-verbal, narrative, and experiential, and the other analytical, deliberative, verbal, and rational" (710).

Keith E. Stanovich and Richard F. West labeled these two modes of thinking *System 1* and *System 2*. One of the characteristics of System 1, the experiential or intuitive system, is its affective basis. Although reasoned analysis (System 2) is certainly important in many decision-making circumstances, reliance on affect and emotion is generally a quicker, easier, and more efficient way to navigate in a complex, uncertain, and sometimes dangerous world. Many theorists have given affect a direct and primary role in motivating behavior.

Underlying the role of affect in the experiential system is the importance of images, to which positive or negative feelings become attached. Images in this system include not only visual images, important as these may be, but words, sounds, smells, memories, and products of our imagination. Daniel Kahneman notes that one of the functions of System 2 is to monitor the quality of the intuitive impressions formed by System 1. Kahneman suggests that this monitoring is typically rather lax and allows many intuitive judgments to be expressed in behavior, including some that are erroneous. This point has important implications developed below.

In addition to positive and negative affect, more nuanced feelings such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, and sadness have been found to be critical for motivating people to help others (Coke, Batson, and McDavis; Dickert and Slovic; Eisenberg and Miller). As C. Daniel Batson put it, "Considerable research suggests that we are more likely to help someone in need when we 'feel for' that person . . ." (339).

A particularly important psychological insight comes from Jonathan Haidt, who argues that moral intuitions (akin to System 1) precede moral judgments. Specifically, he asserts that

> *moral intuition* can be defined as the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good–bad, like–dislike), without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion. Moral intuition is therefore . . . akin to aesthetic judgment: One sees or hears about a social event and one instantly feels approval or disapproval. ("Emotional" 818)

In other words, feelings associated with moral intuition usually dominate moral judgment, unless we make an effort to use judgment to critique and, if necessary, override intuition.

Not that our moral intuitions aren't, in many cases, sophisticated and accurate. They are much like human visual perceptions in this regard, equipped with shortcuts that most of the time serve us well but occasionally lead us seriously astray (Kahneman). Indeed, like perception, which is subject under certain conditions to visual illusions, our moral intuitions can be very misguided. In particular, our intuitions fail us in the face of genocide and mass atrocities. This points to the need to create laws and institutions, designed to stimulate reasoned analysis, that can help us overcome the deficiencies in our ability to *feel* the need to act. This appreciation of the importance of reason provides a foundation for rhetorical psychology, to which we now turn.

Rhetorical Psychology

The field of rhetorical psychology finds its most complete expression in the work of Michael Billig. Joining the disciplines of rhetoric and psychology, Billig outlines a rhetorical approach to social psychology. In so doing, he pairs the humanistic study of argumentative reason with the social scientific approach to human relations. In this section, we explain how the pairing of the fields of rhetoric and psychology can serve as a foundation for genocide pedagogy.

Rhetoric and Genocide Pedagogy

Jonathan Glover in *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* searched for a mechanism that encouraged resistance to genocide. He confirmed the position that in the face of the failure of moral intuition, reason and argument can inculcate the values needed for people to oppose genocide. Citing the work of Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, Glover found that those who resisted the Nazi tyranny tended to come from homes in which children were encouraged to ask questions and reason through argument: "The emphasis was on reasoning rather than discipline. It was the exact opposite for the leading Nazis" (Glover 351).

The emphasis on questions and reasons seems to prompt a moral concern for others. Based on a set of questionnaires, the Oliners found: "It is their reliance on reasoning, explanations, suggestions of ways to remedy the harm done, persuasion, and advice that the parents of rescuers differed

most from nonrescuers" (181). Ultimately, an emphasis on moral reasoning in all of our institutional, legal, and political institutions will help inoculate against genocidal logic and rhetoric and overcome the problem of psychic numbing.

In contrast, as Hannah Arendt has demonstrated, totalitarian modes of thinking can lead to and justify genocide. Such thinking tends to resist empirical confirmation, is expressed through deductive logic, with a ruling major premise that does not allow for exception, and obeys the law of noncontradiction. Totalitarian thought and reasoning provide complete explanations of the world, and do not foster a concern for others. Rhetorical reasoning, expressed in argumentation and dialogue, offers an alternative.

Those who study rhetoric seek to illuminate how audiences are persuaded with reasoned discourse, which Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca and a host of others believe is a source of moral action. Stressing the "importance of the argumentative and dialogical nature of thinking," Billig calls on social psychologists to consider the role played by rhetoric in the creation of meaning, one they rarely consider (22, 39). Billig's account of argumentative reason assumes the importance of lived experience, which is open to study and verification. The logic of this expression of reason presumes division and contraction, that a "rhetorical approach stresses the two-sidedness of human thinking and of our conceptual capacities. A rhetorician is brought face to face with the contrary aspects of thought . . ." (Billig 79).

The tradition and discipline of rhetoric assumes the plurality of values and human reasoning. There are, in this tradition, multiple expressions of reasonability. Explanation and the proof justifying claims are at the center of argument and dialogue. The assumptions of rhetoric and argument feature experience outside the self, with the aspiration of joining the speaker and audience. The act of reasoning together can cultivate moral responses to suffering.

The study of argumentation, a subfield within the larger discipline of rhetoric, features the analysis of argumentative exchanges and the reasons people offer to persuade and justify claims, and in the Western culture begins with the works of Aristotle. Within this field, much has been written about the relationship between and among examples, illustrations, and generalizations, reflecting the more general concerns to establish

principles of good reasoning, a central issue in the development of a genocide pedagogy. While Newcomb may be right about the vulgarity of statistics, that generalizations expressed in numbers have little persuasive power, there is a vulgarity inherent in the example that may give the particular undue influence. The key is to create a properly calibrated message that includes the example and the statistic. Unfortunately, scholars of rhetoric and argumentation have yet to fully embrace research offered by social psychology, a need Billig addresses in his scholarship, to explain how people come to categorize and particularize. Social psychologists study the social world of humans using the methods of science. The overlap between the fields of rhetoric and social psychology is most pronounced in the division social psychologists make between two types of cognitive processes discussed above.

Social Psychology and Genocide Pedagogy

How should we value the human lives that are threatened by genocide or other catastrophes? Reason would have us look to basic principles or fundamental values for guidance. For example, Article 1 of the U. N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that "[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." We might infer from this the conclusion that every human life is of equal value. If so, then—applying a rational calculation—the value of saving *N* lives is *N* times the value of saving one life, as represented by the linear function in Figure 1.

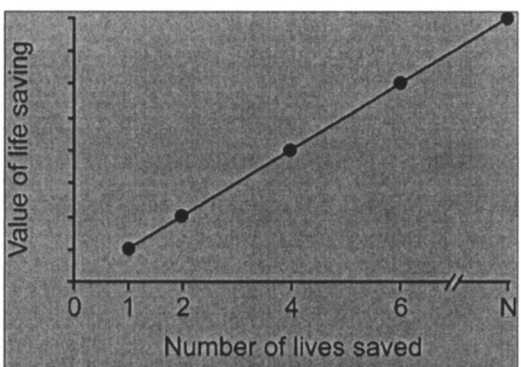

Figure 1. A normative model for valuing the saving of human lives. Every human life is of equal value.

An argument can also be made for judging large losses of life to be disproportionately more serious because they threaten the social fabric and viability of a group or community, as with genocide (see Figure 2). Debate can be had at the margins over whether one should assign greater value to younger people versus the elderly, or whether governments have a duty to give more weight to the lives of their own people, and so on, but a perspective approximating the equality of human lives is rather uncontroversial.

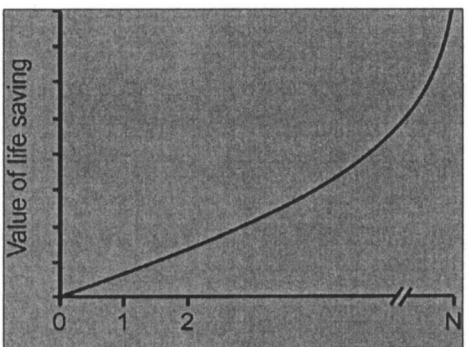

Figure 2. Another normative model: Large losses threaten the viability of the group or society.

How *do* we actually value human lives? These descriptive models demonstrate responses that are insensitive to large losses of human life, consistent with apathy toward genocide. There is considerable evidence that our affective responses and the resulting value we place on saving human lives follow the same sort of "psychophysical function" that characterizes our diminished sensitivity to changes in a wide range of perceptual and cognitive entities—brightness, loudness, heaviness, and wealth—as their underlying magnitudes increase (Slovic, "If I Look"). As psychophysical research indicates, constant increases in the magnitude of a stimulus typically evoke smaller and smaller changes in response. Applying this principle to the valuing of human life suggests that a form of *psychophysical numbing* may result from our inability to appreciate losses of life as they become larger. The function in Figure 3 represents

a value structure in which the importance of saving one life is great when it is the first, or only, life saved but diminishes as the total number of lives at risk increases. Thus, psychologically, the importance of saving one life pales against the background of a larger threat: we may not "feel" much difference, nor value the difference, between saving 87 lives and saving 88. In other words, the human brain is equipped to understand what Koestler called the "small lumps" of reality, but the larger the numbers involved, the more difficult it is to respond with affect. Slovic explains: "When applied to human lives, the value function implies that the subjective value of saving a specific number of lives is greater for a smaller tragedy than for a larger one" ("If I Look" 85). Moreover, research also documents that feelings "are lacking when large losses of life are represented simply as numbers or statistics" ("If I Look" 83). The images and symbols designed to elicit action in the face of genocide need to be constructed with an appreciation of the challenges posed by this pattern, one that is captured in the notion of "psychic numbing."

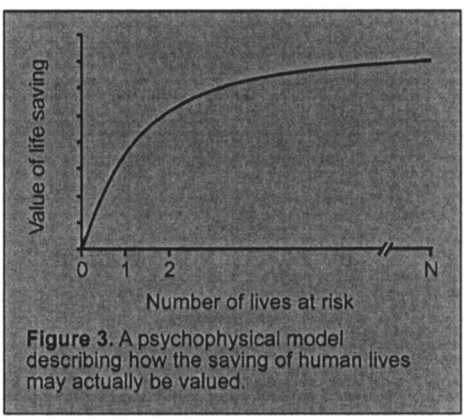

Figure 3. A psychophysical model describing how the saving of human lives may actually be valued.

Robert J. Lifton coined the term "psychic numbing" to describe how victims of great trauma block out certain painful experiences in order to survive. The psychological literature suggests that witnesses and bystanders to genocide are effectively "numbed" by a "compassion fatigue." This fatigue, in turn, is a function of cognitive processing in which affect and sympathy decreases as the numbers of those suffering increases. Psychic numbing and compassion fatigue become profoundly rhetorical problems

for activists and officials who seek to mobilize people and governments against genocide and must construct messages to overcome the bias in System 1 processing.

Scholars and teachers seeking to develop a genocide pedagogy will need to feature System 2 cognitive processing, for

> as powerful as System 1 is, when infused with vivid experiential stimulation (witness the moral outrage triggered by the photos of abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq), it has a darker side. We cannot rely on it. It depends upon attention and feelings that may be hard to arouse and sustain over time for large numbers of victims, not to speak of numbers as small as two. Left to its own devices, System 1 will likely favor individual victims and sensational stories that are closer to home and easier to imagine. It will be distracted by images that produce strong, though erroneous, feelings, like percentages as opposed to actual numbers. Our sizable capacity to care for others may also be overridden by more pressing personal interests. (Slovic, "If I Look" 91)

Newcomb quite rightly suspects the vulgarity of numbers, but there is also danger in the powerful example. The singular story can determine the narrative of a genocide, severely distorting its meaning and history (Picart and Frank). Indeed, given the almost primordial roles played by System 1 cognitive processing, there is a certain vulgarity in its reliance on the singular example or illustration when they are not representative.

To account for the insensitivity in System 1 processing of information, we must step back from intuitive judgments and allow the process of reasoning to illuminate needed correctives, but to do so without losing affect. To accomplish this goal, we will need to acknowledge that affect and judgment are intertwined, that System 2 cognitive processes should account for the role of emotion and feeling in judgment, and that we need to scale up from the example to the statistic without losing the affect. One way to view this is to view the statistic through the lens of the individual. Understanding this need, Arthur Kurzweil has observed: "Six million Jewish people is one Jewish person six million times" (243). Folding the statistic into the illustration calls for the integration of rhetoric and social psychology established in the field of rhetorical psychology. In what follows, we draw from rhetoric the concept of presence and moral

argumentation and from psychology the construct of the "warm glow" to chart a path between the vulgarity of the number and the example.

Presence and Moral Argumentation

Rhetoricians have intuited from persuasive practices the importance of organization, delivery, and the framing of evidence for the purposes of moving an audience to action. In their 1958 masterwork, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write that the choice of foregrounding an image or symbol vests them with "presence" in acting on the perception of the audience. Citing the work of Jean Piaget, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca implicitly recognized the role played by System 1 in perception: "The thing on which the eye dwells, that which is best or most often seen, is, by that very circumstance, overestimated" (116–17). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's observation provides a theory of rhetoric explaining Slovic's observation: "The foibles of imagery and attention impact feelings in a manner that can help explain apathy toward genocide" ("If I Look" 83), namely, that as the numbers of those suffering increases, attention decreases, and so does compassion. In turn, the two systems of cognitive processing establish the psychological foundations of presence.

The rhetorical construction of presence is a function of five characteristics. First, it is the result of an advocate gaining and sustaining the attention of an audience, no small matter. Second, the advocate who has secured the attention of the audience reinforces and changes beliefs and perceptions. Third, the advocate must exercise imagination to create and sustain presence. Fourth, the successful construction of presence by an advocate should elicit action by the audience. Fifth, presence is created with artfully constructed and calibrated images and symbols. An understanding of presence can help address the vulgarity of numbers.

To achieve presence, images and symbols should be constructed to convey and elicit feelings. Intuitive processing inherently diminishes the affect of large numbers, suppressing the individual faces and tragedies associated with genocide. Similarly, the use of a graphic example may suppress accurate generalizations. The use of ideological laws to suppress the individual helps underscore this point. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca

cite Arthur Koestler's essay in *The God that Failed* to illustrate how the presence of two friends, falsely accused by the communists of collaborating with the Nazis, caused him to renounce his allegiance to communism. When he was forced to choose either an abstract communist ideology or two concrete individuals, Koestler opted for the latter. There is, of course, the danger that unrepresentative examples and illustrations can invite overreactions, which is the claim Sartre made when he defended the communist project in the face of the "errors" of the moment (Judt 122). The problem we face in constructing a genocide policy is, unfortunately, one of severe under-reaction. Psychology can offer insights on how symbols and images can be constructed to convey the affect and feeling necessary to give them presence.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca identify many rhetorical strategies used to enhance or diminish presence. These strategies include repetition, illustrations, accumulation of material, evocative details, and the use of metaphor and analogy. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's innovative analysis of illustration directly answers the problem of the vulgarity of numbers and the danger of using the example. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, examples build to a general rule; the illustration assumes a general rule, and "seeks to increase presence by making an abstract rule concrete by means of a particular case" (360). The rhetorical technique of illustration "does not lead to a replacement of the abstract by the concrete, or to the transposition of structures into another sphere. It really *is* a particular case, it corroborates the rule, it can even, as in proverbs, actually serve to state the rule" (360). For the purposes of a genocide pedagogy, it is important to understand that illustrations "are often chosen for their affective impact" (360). Kurzweil's statement, "Six million Jewish people is one Jewish person six million times," folds one person into six million and back again, demonstrating the potential of the illustration to navigate between the danger of statistics and the example, while retaining the affective connection to the individual. In addition to presence, moral argumentation is a necessary condition for action against genocide.

Moral Argument and Genocide

As Slovic and others have demonstrated, intuitive judgment and moral argument are the two cognitive mechanisms available to confront genocide. Hannah Arendt's chilling portrait of Adolph Eichmann, the architect of the final solution, portrayed him as an official who was not confronted with the evil of his deeds. No one argued with him, and his moral intuitions, as well as those of many Germans, failed. The second mechanism, moral argument, offers a check beyond System 1 cognitive processing.

Moral argument is a social act, one conducted in community. Given the flaws in moral intuition, moral argument provides a needed, but not an infallible, check. Moral argument assumes the desirability of division in a community and the value of disagreement, while nesting both in systems of reason allowing for judgment. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write, there is something inherently moral about arguing with others instead of using violence (see Frank), a claim backed by the Oliner's research demonstrating that the use of moral argument, instead of corporal punishment, helps prepare children for moral action.

Beyond the individual and family, moral argument is needed to press national and international governments to prevent and work against genocide. In the face of the failure of intuitive judgments to prevent genocide, particularly in nations ravaged by civil war and internal conflict, national and international law should require officials to publically justify their actions or inactions. Justification is at the heart of moral argument and ethics; by making public the reasons for acting against or ignoring genocide, the larger public can act (Slovic, "Can International Law"). If enforced, a requirement for public justification would likely heighten pressure to act to save lives rather than allowing innocent people to die.

Newcomb is likely correct when he observes that "nothing is more difficult to measure than suffering" (177). Psychological research certainly demonstrates the inability of feelings to adjust appropriately to problems of great magnitude. Affect seems not to have been shaped by evolution to respond to scope (Hsee and Rottenstreich), and in fact may simply be ordinal in its calibration (Pham, Toubia, and Lin). Newcomb concludes, and we concur, that "the impossibility of responding in a measured or completely just way to the suffering of others does not mean

that questions of justice should be ignored . . . " (209). Although our affective response to large numbers is muted and imprecise, we certainly should recognize when a situation is so bad as to demand a response. If killing one is bad, killing thousands must be at least equally bad, even with numbing. The problem then is to ensure that, when this recognition occurs, our system of laws and institutions is able to produce a just response, and that we develop educational systems designed to cultivate argument and a concern for others.

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Notes

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