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Final Paper, 5/18/21, Recitation Section N

The Human Mind: Evolved for Selfishness

Throughout history, we know that humanity is capable of doing absolutely abhorrent things to each other. Humanity has also evolved intelligence and thus we are capable of rationalizing the actions of ourselves and others with thoughts. In the worst cases of humanity, genocide and weapons of mass destruction, perpetrators need to be able to justify to themselves and the people that this is the correct action. The motivations behind every instance of these cases would naturally vary depending on various factors like rank, psychology, and situation of the perpetrator, but understanding broadly why people would commit such bad things requires an answer that is tied to our fundamental humanity, selfishness for survival. Humans are naturally wired for self-preservation as a means to survive in nature, and this thinking has continued to evolve with us as civilizations began to develop. Our reasoning behind actions follows two main instincts, that we must focus on ourselves first and that we prioritize our survival by acting in a manner that avoids loss and seeks gain. Thus, the motivations behind these cases inherently lies in perpetrators focusing on themselves first. To say that the sole reasons that perpetrators commit their awful actions for just greed and self-interest is only partially true, because perpetrators are primarily motivated by self-interest and dehumanization with their actions dictated by their autonomy in the situation.

First, the clearest cases of perpetrators being motivated by their own survival comes from two genocides: the Cambodian Genocide and the Holocaust. In the case of the Cambodian Genocide, we have lower-level perpetrators who follow orders to avoid having their families killled or being killed themselves. In *Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields*, the common farmers often stated that they committed their actions because they were following orders with one particularly extreme case shown by the story of the man who mercilessly killed a woman on command.1 These farmers have also stated that they feared disobeying orders because they or their families would be killed, thus they demonstrated great loyalty to the Khmer Rouge. Similarly, in *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*, Duch, a midlevel functionary of the Cambodian Genocide, appeared to be motivated initially by the party’s ideology, but he stated that he was trapped in his position once he was promoted. There was also this fear in Duch that he did not want to be perceived as an “individualist” and be betrayed by his subordinates, so he lead as a ruthless leader that dehumanized his prisoners and expected absolute loyalty from his men.2 Both of these cases demonstrate that the Cambodian Genocide was a situation that involved life or death for the perpetrators and that individual survival was the key motivations behind their action. On the other hand, the Holocaust was a case that involved more autonomy towards individual perpetrators. In *Ordinary Men*, the end of the first chapter states that Major Trapp allowed his men to step out should they not want to kill the remaining Jews in Józefów.3 This is important context to show that the Holocaust perpetrators did not have a life or death element and that they were able to refuse orders if they wished. In this case, survival played a more indirect, but still important role. Survival in this case was more on a social level in terms of reputation. Thus, the environment of Nazi Germany is key to creating the outcomes of the Holocaust. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning compares the findings of the Stanford Prison Experiment with the behaviors of Battalion 101 to demonstrate that situational factors and established power dynamics lead to sadistic behaviors by some individuals.4 It is this environment that calls for more extreme action and failure to do so would make one suspicious and appear to not belong to the violent pack of the perpetrators. This pressure to maintain their social image is comparable to what Duch experienced from the Cambodian Genocide. In both cases, the best move for surviving the deadly regimes that controlled their countries was to prove their loyalty to the regime’s ideology, thus these individuals acted due to structuralism. Altogether, it is evident that the actions that the perpetrators committed in both of these genocides were to keep themselves from becoming the victim themselves.

Next, the cases where perpetrators appear to be motivated by greed come from the cases of the Spanish conquest of the Americas and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The consequences of the Spanish conquest were inherently greedy. The native population was utterly decimated by the Spanish, while the Spanish gained land and riches. When it comes down to the motivations for their conquest, the Spanish drafted the Requirement, a document that “...was designed to be read to Indians before hostilities could be legally launched.”5 Essentially, it was a religious justification for Spain to subjugate the Natives, but this was hardly the intention behind it. This is best exemplified in “The Laugh of Doctor”, a soldier believes in a moral obligation to read the Requirement, but even the author laughs off the abuse of his document.6 Since the Requirement holds no more weight than as a formality, the real intentions of the Spanish were not of noble, religious origins, but rather human selfishness. This is a case of greed and not survival, and this is why the statement is partially true. Perpetrators are self-interested, but not every case is about survival in the context of self losses. Instead, perpetrators can be motivated by self-gain as in these cases, but what unites these two motivations is their inherent selfishness tied to the perpetrators. Looking at the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the primary motivations are pure human greed for creating a system of profit at the expense of a whole race. According to Grenke, the Middle Passage exemplified this motivation for profit because slaves were overcrowded in ships and given poor conditions in order to maximize the profits from the travel.7 Actions were taken from all parties involved in the slave trade to “maximize” the value out of the slave whether it was transporting them, auctioning them, or owning them. This is an arguably worse case of greed compared to the Spanish conquest, because of the generational destruction that would affect African slaves that leave a legacy that lasts to today. These two cases demonstrate more of intentionalism in terms of greed, but that this greed is inherently tied to the selfish nature of humanity.

Then, the motivations behind these actions are not motivated alone by the instinct to survive but require dehumanization as a trigger. Many of these actions taken by the perpetrators cannot solely be motivated by selfishness and survival instincts alone, because the consciousness of the perpetrators would still be disgusted with the exact actions they took. Thus, the real reason that the perpetrators were able to act as horrendously as they did was that they were able to dehumanize their victims. Looking back on the Cambodian Genocide, Duch stated in his interview how he dehumanized the prisoners and by stating it was better to kill innocents than let a guilty person live. He needs his men and himself to believe that the people they captured were enemies that would destroy their country to take the actions of torture and killing.8 In the Holocaust, dehumanization played an essential role in normalizing violence for the ordinary citizens of Nazi Germany. In “The Good Old Days,” a pogrom occurred where ordinary citizens used violence against Jews, and particularly, a Jewish woman had been shot, swollen from her cheeks, and refused medical aid due to the presence of brutal SS officers.9 Another case of violence comes from *Ordinary Men* with the case of a pogrom of beating and shooting transpiring into systemic murder through mercilessly incinerating masses of Jews trapped in a synagogue (Browning, Chapter 3).10 Another case comes from the dehumanization that occurs towards native populations from colonization. In the case of the Belgian-ruled Congo, the natives were seen as violent people in need of reforming their culture to the standards of civilized Europe. In *The Truth about the Congo*, Starr’s defense of the “lonely white man” in Africa suffering inevitable moral disintegration holds the implication that the Congolese are immoral savages.11 Additionally, the quote “Any nation that insists upon bearing the black man’s burden must pay this price” emphasizes dehumanization held against Africans.12 Continuing with natives being dehumanized, the Spanish conquest of the New World was also motivated by this notion that the Natives were savages who needed the guidance of a superior society. Columbus shaped this perspective to Spanish royalty, the main decision-makers, as he referred to the Natives as “ingenious, and would be good servants.”13 Finally, the other case of dehumanization has to deal with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The aspect of human beings being treated as a commodity simply to maximize profit is already well established, but the end treatment is something that further enhances the history of their dehumanization. According to Grenke, slaves were treated differently, but generally worse in different areas and this led to differing birth rates, death rates, and lifespan, but that stress was a contributor to enhancing the fertility of slaves.14 Slaves were worked to death in harsh conditions, lived off of barely anything, endured physical and mental suffering, and even made to have children to continue the cruel cycle for economic profit. Slaves being seen as not human is already a well-established fact at this time, but understanding all of these actions exemplifies the extent to which they were regarded as livestock to be used. From all of the cases established, we know that people did detestable things to other human beings, but how can they deal with their moral consciousness in face of the extent of their actions? The answer is dehumanization because they can warp their perspective of reality into a heavily biased narrative that justifies their actions.

Altogether, human history has been full of suffering caused by people acting selfishly across the dimensions of gain and loss, and that the extent of their actions depends on their ability to dehumanize others and autonomy in their situations. Why do people do such bad things to each other? It is a simple question that yields many complex and unsatisfying answers. To attempt to understand it, we observed that perpetrators act selfishly for survival or greed and dehumanization gives them the extent to act as they do. Additionally, autonomy plays a major role in deciding whether their actions reflect intentionalism or structuralism. Even so, this is not a fully satisfactory response to that simple question. Other factors may still play a crucial role in individual perpetrators such as their religious faith, ideological support, group conformity, and inherent psyche. This broad-strokes perspective only rationalizes the decision-making of lower-level individuals within their atrocities, but it does little in understanding the proper trigger within the mind of the leader who initially proposed these actions be taken. Ultimately, the legacies of these events should inform us of the dangers of blindly following our selfish instincts and following normalized behaviors. People need to be critical of their actions and others and acknowledge the humanity of others to combat recreating the genocides that happened prior. It is important to have a strong moral compass that is composed of altruism and humanity to oppose the inherent nature of the self-interested, rational mind.

# Endnotes

1. *Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields*, dir. Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath, Old Street Films, 2009.

2. *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*, dir. Rithy Panh, First Run Features, 2011.

3. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, revised ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), Chapter 1.

4. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, Chapter 18.

5. Lewis Hanke, ed., *History of Latin American Civilization: Sources and Interpretations. Volume One: The Colonial Experience*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 93.

6. Benjamin Keen, ed., *Readings in Latin-American Civilization: 1492 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 89.

7. Arthur Grenke, *Genocide from Antiquity to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: History and Comparative Analysis* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 265.

8. *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*

9. Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, eds., “The Good Old Days”: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders, trans. Deborah Burnstone (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 37.

10. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, Chapter 3.

11. Frederick Starr, *The Truth about the Congo: The Chicago Tribune Articles* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1907), 40-41.

12. Starr, *The Truth about the Congo*, 46

13. Keen, ed., *Readings in Latin-American Civilization*, 52.

14. Grenke, *Genocide from Antiquity to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, 269-271.